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IN GOLDEN SHACKLES.

IN
GOLDEN SHACKLES

BY

"ALIEN", pseud.

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AUTHOR OF

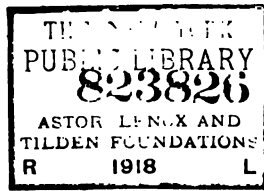
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IN GOLDEN SHACKLES.

CHAPTER I

PROSPECTING

FOR more than two hundred miles the river Wanganui—the Rhine of the North Island of New Zealand—winds its tortuous course through scenes of enchanting loveliness. Native villages and settlements nestle upon its banks half hidden by plantations. Groves of palm and fern fringe the water's edge ; stately palms cluster in weird groups : flowering toi-toi waves its feathered crests in contrast to the dark beauty of manuka scrub and kauri forest. Swift, silvery rapids, deep, still pools and sandy beaches, bronze rocks edged with mountain lilies nature has scattered with prodigal hand ; and framed the glint of water, the green of foliage, the gleam of gold and crimson, with the solemn beauty of purple crowned cliffs.

On the bank of one of the Wanganui's tributary streams, under a growth of fern, two little children played—a boy and a girl.

IN GOLDEN SHACKLES

The boy, who was about seven, sat on a fallen moss-grown log, his dirty, chubby hands resting upon torn knicker-bockered knees. A broad-brimmed straw hat lay on the ground beside him, his head covered only by his fair curling hair. His eyes were grey, large and thoughtful, and between his brows a queer little pucker of thought showed disapprobation, or perplexity. Nothing could be seen of the girl, except a blue sunbonnet and a pair of legs. She was lying on her back among the soft grass, kicking her heels in the air.

"T'ain't no good lookin' no more, I can't find 'em!" said a sweet, thin treble from the sunbonnet. The boy regarded the kicking legs gravely and asked in slow, serious tones, "'Cause why?"

The legs paused for a perceptible moment, then moved faster.

"I dun' no," answered the treble.

"'Cause there ain't no fairies," proceeded the boy, in deliberate, even tones. "They don't live nowhere; they ain't reel; nor the man in the moon ain't reel too."

The busy legs suddenly ceased operation. They were held in the air for a moment, then came to earth with a thud. A small body and an auburn head appeared above the grass. A pair of heavily fringed, brown eyes, and a rosy, curved mouth protested against this intolerable demolition of fairyland. Her little feet were weary in her broken

PROSPECTING

shoes, searching the dales ; her hands were sore and soiled turning stones in vain quest of treasures, but—

“ I don’t b’lieve you,” she said with energy, her mouth quivering, and then she disappeared and again protested with her heels.

The boy looked away from the kicking feet, as though the sight worried him, his eyes slowly glancing at the blue of the northern summer sky, at the white flowers and grey rocks, the peaks and green slopes bathed in the warm, rich glow of the setting sun ; then came back to the place where his sister lay. Only his own little human figure was visible in that rosy, hushed solemnity. It was pathetic in the wistfulness of attitude and expression.

“ I know what’s reel ; heaven’s reel,” he said, “ an’ the moon’s the door of heaven, what God opens at the top of the cliff. If you’ll come along with me, Bell, to-night, we’ll look in, an’ p’r’aps we’ll see mother.”

A bird hidden among the trees set up such a cry of derision that both the children were startled. Bell sat up suddenly, but discovering the source of alarm, lay down again. Hers, like the feathered dissenter’s, was a perverted taste, for—

“ No,” she said, “ I doo want to go to heaven ! I doo want to go along o’ you—it’s too further off,” and her legs once more emphasised

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her feelings in a manner more forcible than elegant.

But the boy would not have the topic thus dismissed. To him it was one worthy of consideration, and without a change of attitude, and scarcely of expression, he pondered it ; feeling round slowly in his mind for a bribe sufficiently glittering with which to seduce her.

" Bell," he said slowly at last.

" Yes, Walter," and this rather eagerly, for she guessed, by the tone, that something acceptable was to be proffered.

" I'll carry you pick-a-back all the way."

This promised diversion. Climbing to heaven, after a long and disappointing fairy hunt, was one thing—being carried there, another. Bell rose instantly. There was nothing ridiculous to her in the idea of mounting to the regions celestial, astride her guide ; she preferred the easy and pleasurable progression to the majestic.

All aglow with the pride of her conversion, yet with an intimate acquaintance of the variableness of Bell's moods, Walter was urging an immediate start, when the fact struck him that their persons were scarcely in a fit condition for presentation at the Golden Gates. " Mother wouldn't like to see her little children dirty," he affirmed persuasively.

Bell's merry face took on a thoughtful expression. She examined her hands carefully, then

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stood in front of her brother and surveyed him critically. She secretly valued his opinion on most subjects ; he was a boy, and two years older than herself. She jerked the corners of the not too clean pinafore, then assented in her sweet treble, " S'pose she won't."

Walter shook his head. His mother was a living memory to him ; to Bell only a tradition ; but, with a pretty trick she had of sweet humility, when her brother's ideas coincided with her own, she immediately began to disrobe ; her acquiescence implied eagerness.

The children plunged into the stream, and, forgetful of loftier aspirations, played at being fishes—and swam like them. The Maoris at the settlement near had taught them to swim as they teach their own children, by throwing them into the water before they had learned to fear.

Their innocence was too nearly akin to that of the savage to know shame, and, as they dived beneath the weeds and water lilies, and emerged laughing and radiant, they might have been the spirits of a spot where, except for the glances of their unobserving eyes, all the glory of the year came and went unseen.

The sombre cliffs and sparkling stream, the dancing waterfall and the marvel of light and shade seemed an artist's background of cunning skill subservient to the nude beauty of human

IN GOLDEN SHACKLES

flesh. The sun, slowly descending to the wooded peaks, appeared to shed all its light upon their gleaming, dimpled limbs ; every luminous ray centred upon the children ; they gave a personality, an individuality to the grandeur and strength and weird beauty of the scene.

They knew every mood of the stream ; when to play with it, and when to fear. When the winter storm thundered along the valley and swept round the curves like a live thing, Bell called it lions roaring, and when the wind tore through the forest and beat the tree tops together, with a sound rivaling artillery, she said it was a great battle ; but the boy, lacking her imagination, sat, a lonesome little figure, apart, and with a hand upon each knee, would look on in reverent awe and say that God was angry ; and, not in fear for himself, but in pity for the torn and mangled things, would cry quietly—ashamed that Bell should see his tears, yet unable wholly to restrain them. The mother had come from a line of saints and martyrs and, from her, Walter had inherited a Calvinistic austerity, that in spite of his gentleness, enabled him, upon occasions, to hurt himself in the chastening of his sister. At these times he fostered her body, while he denied her his companionship, keeping apart and musing on his mother's words about the New Jerusalem. Those were the longest, the awfulest, and dreariest nights to Bell ; when she

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sobbed herself to sleep, pining for her brother's kiss, and the human touch withheld because of human frailty.

But, at all other times, when there was no question of theology to make a breach between them, the baby Christian and the infant Sceptic had very good times, swimming in the river, or punting in the old boat ; or, while Walter sat patiently for hours fishing with a bent pin and a worm, Bell would pursue the more active and ambitious occupations of hunting for fairies, or digging for gold with a small iron spade. Both children found equal recompense. But they watched one another for results, with a searching scepticism worthy of more serious matters. When hungry or sleepy they climbed the stone ladder in the cliff that led up to the house ; they ate heartily and slept soundly—the sweet air and sunshine did the rest for them. Unnursed, untended, they knew no disquietude, and scarcely an hour of desolation, except that which chanced from their own baby discord.

The rosy mist of the sunset had changed to purple shadows, the gorgeous blue and crimson of the sky to pale, indefinite hues when the children set off upon their quest.

Difficult was the path the boy toiled up with his unaccustomed burden. They met a Maori woman on the native track driving her cow home to her

IN GOLDEN SHACKLES

tiny clearing. She gave them the word of greeting "*Tena Koe*" as she passed. A muffled response came from the bended boy, and a cheerful, shrill "*Tena Koe*" from Bell. The woman showed her white, even teeth in a broad smile, and watched the small figures until they were lost in flowering undergrowth ; then turned to descend the rugged path barefooted, with the majesty of carriage of a woman who can walk unfatigued over mountains, for the whole day through.

With many intervals of rest, silently and determinedly the young pilgrim panted upward, until he reached the ridge upon the top ; then he set his burden down. He knew what they should presently see, he thought, while they sat there expectantly on the dusky eminence—the City Beautiful ; and Bell would know most certainly that heaven was true. Bell herself felt some anticipation and tried to arrange her hair. She had lost her sun-bonnet far down the track—but perhaps the angels wouldn't object to her hair ? " Keep still !" Walter responded to this too feminine query, and Bell kept still. The quiet grew, broken at intervals by the sad bleating of a sheep, and the far-off barking of a shepherd's dog, and the indistinct call of "Coo-ee" down in the glen. The short twilight deepened momentarily, the air became fragrant with aromatic scents ; the sounds akin to man died

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out, the muffled roar of falling water becoming more distinct.

The mystery of peak and thicket had no alarming suggestions for the children. They had not read of tribal hates and blood feuds ; of the invasion by their fathers, the *pakehas*, and the fierce resistance of the Maoris. This Northern Island, rich in legend and superstition, was the only world they knew, the Maoris were their friends ; and they did not see aggressive tattooed chieftain, or dark-skinned enemy crouching in the weird shadows, or assuming form from gnarled stumps and fallen trees.

Presently a shaft of bright light shot across the tree tops, and lit the fleecy clouds in the gap of pale sky above them. Two little hearts bumped loudly. Bell gave a half choking gasp, and drew nearer to Walter. Was God indeed opening His door ? They sat hand in hand and waited. The light widened and spread, the summit of the rocks showed a steely ridge ; the patch of sky grew luminous and the lacing and interlacing foliage was a delicate silver network. A moment more and the moon rode into the heavens—far away, over stupendous cliffs.

When Walter realised that the transcendent vision he had dreamed was not for them, and that the sight of his mother's face was a far-off improb-

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ability, he lay down on the ground and wept bitterly.

Bell was too profoundly sorry for her brother to weep for herself. She understood his disappointment because of her own about the fairies. She kissed him and dabbled his wet face with a corner of her pinafore ; then, hand in hand, they descended the zigzag path almost in silence, now flitting into patches of moonlight, now disappearing in shadow, until, at last, they emerged into broad light beside the stream.

They crossed a wooden suspension bridge that spanned the chasm to the opposite cliff ; then, by a winding, undulating path through a jungle of broom and shrubs, came to a secluded glen bounded on both sides by high cliffs. Under the shelter of a grove of trees, a solitary cottage stood, built partly of logs, and partly of weather boards, its rough verandas massed with creeping vine. From the open door a red flood of lamplight streamed. The two weary wayfarers made for the door and entered a long, low room, untidy and scantily furnished. A middle-aged man, seated in a rough arm-chair, looked at them through a cloud of tobacco smoke, when they went in, and said, not unkindly, in tones partly of admonition and partly of query, " Well, you two ? "

Bell's sensitive lips quivered as she went forward

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with a little protesting gesture, and an expression of perplexed regret.

"Daddy, there aren't *no* fairies," she said with a deep sigh, "an' heaven's too further off."

"That's bad hearing," replied her father, lifting her upon his knee, and looking into her troubled face with a twinkle in his blue eyes. "Very bad news indeed ; but suppose you and Walter have your supper ; there's this world left, you know."

CHAPTER II

ARTHUR SEARELL

ARTHUR SEARELL was a broken-down gentleman—an unlucky devil he called himself. Nothing had prospered with him. He had done his level best, he said. Something was at fault; he had had persistent bad luck. At twenty-five he had abandoned law—but not before the law threatened to abandon him—and left England for the Australian gold fields, and while other men made fortunes, he barely made his bread. He moved about from place to place, with no definite purpose, except to shift his scene, buoyed ever with the hope that Fate, when she had done her sport with him, would ultimately be kind. At the age of forty-five he drifted to Wanganui, where he met the woman who became his wife.

She was past her first womanhood when they met, a white little thing of frail body and iron will, who had charm for him because she possessed those qualities he lacked. She was capable as he was makeshift, thrifty as he was extravagant. Without ostentation or self-assertion, she took his

ARTHUR SEARELL

life into her firm little hands, and while apparently leaving him all freedom, by irresistible compulsion had forced it into one channel—although a narrow one—when she died. The position of schoolmaster at the settlement near had been obtained for Arthur Searell, in compliment to his wife, and, after her death, he had neither energy nor opportunity to better himself. How much dignity the dead wife had shed upon his office, and how much persuasiveness she had brought to bear upon his restlessness, he did not understand till she was gone ; then he mourned her with sorrow that was in part bereft affection, and in part self-pity. She had led him into a new world of order, and left him there, too weak intellectually and morally to proceed unaided. The schoolmaster forgot his wife's personality by degrees ; his love, at best, had been a very undeveloped passion, and he missed more her management, than her presence. Perhaps the part of him with which he had loved her was so much the product of herself that it lived only with her life. She had created new and finer conditions for the man, which, without her atmosphere, faded like spirit photography in a garish light. Nothing of Helen Searell bore lasting fruit, except the two fresh souls she had brought into the world, and left—sorely against her will—without her care.

Their father sat watching them with gloomy

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eyes, while they ate their supper, only removing his gaze for occasional glances round the room, now denuded of those nameless details of refinement which had marked the presence of his wife. A change had come over the household, in which time would make no improvement. His life was absolutely fixed by that environment and nothing could now alter it. A man couldn't fight against bad luck for ever, he complained. He might live there another twenty years with no pursuits beyond the education of semi-barbarians ; he had not the delight the play of civilisation brings ; no indulgence in the enthusiasms and follies of humanity ; the days passed into weeks, weeks into months, untouched by change.

He caught the eyes of Walter, who sat with uncomplaining apathy over his half finished meal. The grey orbs seemed charged with an impressive message from his dead wife—the reminder of broken promises ; and in their appealing, mournful look reproached him as her eyes had been wont to do. He remarked how like the mother's the child's face was to-night. It wore a baffled look. If Walter could have expressed himself, he would have said he felt defeated and alone. Alone with the incommunicable sorrow of ignorance, and yearning for the companionship of knowledge. Everything he vaguely needed the child had not, for there was no one to give him truth in the place

ARTHUR SEARELL

of his vanishing illusions, or to unwind the tangles for him.

The man was giving his children a desolate upbringing. His conscience smote him.

Bell had fallen asleep with her head on the table, her waving hair, which she had washed for her mother to see, streaming over the soiled and crumb-strewn cloth. In a fit of compunction, her father crossed the room, and, taking her in his arms, sat down and proceeded to undress her. Her little pink feet were blistered, and, with unaccustomed tenderness, the man lifted them to his lips.

The caress brought a lump to Walter's throat. The memory of his mother's affection was woven into his whole being, and a renewed sensation of his loss brought the tears to his eyes. They were unseen, however. Two, big, bright drops brimmed slowly over and rolled down his sunburnt cheeks and fell into his unfinished supper.

When Arthur Searell returned to the sitting-room, leaving Bell's soft little body in its bed, he found Walter had shifted his position and was sitting on a low stool upon the hearth, with his hands in that odd, old fashion of his, resting upon his knees. The man was morbidly conscious of the boy's presence. At other times he had been good-humouredly tolerant of his children,—sometimes even taking a careless pleasure in their gam-

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bolts ; to night the air was charged with an electric current perceptible to every sense. He glanced apprehensively into the distant corners of the room as though looking for a calm quakerish figure to step forth from the shadows. He drew a brandy bottle towards him and drank deeply from it. In heaven's name why did the child stare so ? He drank again. The grey eyes still watched him. The man's hands shook ; he went to the door and threw it open. A magical paradise of moonlit beauty spread before him, but he was in no mood for a silent paradise. Change, adventure, excitement, for these he craved ; and he was stranded. As well, he felt, be in a trackless desert—there was no way of escape.

The man was a pathetic sight, as he stood there, blind to all the beauty around him. His figure was tall, and had once been commanding. The hair about his mouth hid its weak irresolution, and gave him an appearance of gravity he had not worn in his youth. He was past the prime of life by ten years, and the brandy bottle was ageing him quickly ; but to-night the instinct of the gambler—to risk what he possessed with hope of future gain returned to him with the force of earlier years, and brought an alert expression to his face and a sparkle to his eyes. The brandy was inventive and came at things in a rapid way. Doubting and wondering disappeared, a new-born op-

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timism lifted the old burden of failure ; he felt new life, new strength, a girding of the will, a passionate desire to get at the good of the world.

He was a man of social instincts, doomed to solitude. His mind went back to his university days, to the converse of men of culture ; and the inherited distinction of class cried out for its prerogative. Some of those men he had known were geniuses, others scholars ; others, like himself, intent upon fortune and pleasure, were younger sons of impoverished households. A throng of associations forced themselves upon him ; the scenes shifted to lighted cities ; to rough diggings, and he laughed aloud as once more, in imagination, he saw the gleam of gold. Freedom ! That was his only perceptible instinct, and it grew with brooding. Freedom to meet man and man, to let each day explain and vindicate itself. Freedom for the long day's tramp and the camp-fire, for the roll of the glorious ocean. He threw back his shoulders and in thought sniffed in the salt spray ; he could hear the flapping of the sails and the dull thud of the waves as they beat the vessel's sides. He knew again what it was to exist untrammelled, unchained. The vividness of his conjuration freed him from the torment of restraint ; he turned with a sound of exultation—and saw the solitary little occupant of the lonely room. His expression changed to smothered rage and pain.

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The children bound him, and the necessities of childhood were too numerous, too varied for him to cope with.

He had no power of choice, he must remain chained to his environment.

He went back to his chair and sat opposite to the boy who was crouching on the hearth. Helping himself to more brandy, he emptied the glass ; then said angrily : " What the deuce are you staring at ? Keep your eyes off me."

The boy's lips trembled. He was accustomed to neglect but not to positive harshness. " Where shall I look, Daddy ?" asked the child chokingly.

" Look up the chimney—out of the window—anywhere ; but don't look at me."

Walter endeavoured to obey. He looked in turn up the wide chimney, out of the uncurtained window, anywhere ; but, by magnetic force, his eyes were drawn back to his father's face. He had never learned to fear it, only not to love it. The wild, bloodshot eyes, and weak, working features had a horrible fascination for him to-night. He had never heard Daddy talk to himself, or laugh and cry like that. He was afraid to approach, and yet he could not go away.

" Shut your eyes—shut your d——d eyes !" roared the drunken man.

He made a lunge forward as though to strike. Walter, with an hysterical cry, called out :

ARTHUR SEARELL

" Oh, Daddy, I *have* to look at you !"

The child's heart thumped against his ribs ; he was sick with fear ; he longed to run away, yet petrified with horror, sat motionless and watched the contortions of his father's face. If he could go into his room, lock the door, and lie down on his bed beside Bell's, he should be safe, he thought dimly. Presently the spell was broken ; with a yell the drunken man sprang towards Walter, who with a shriek leaped to the door, his mad pursuer behind him. Instinctively the boy made for the open, feeling his peril. Crying piteously and trembling in every limb, he stumbled over the uneven ground. There was no one near to deliver him from his father's drunken frenzy, or to hear his cries. Once he fell and cut his hands and knees on a rocky place ; then, recovering himself before the outstretched arm could reach him, got clear of the rocks and undergrowth, and made his way down the narrow path towards the footbridge. The bridge was that which they had passed over earlier. It was used chiefly by children on their way to school. Walter had crossed it hundreds of times. It was painted black, and had a rail only on one side ; bridge and rail both stood out distinctly against the white moonlit hollow it spanned.

With cunning agility the man followed the little flying figure. He was close behind : the boy

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turned with dilated eyes, and, in a panic of terror, stretched out his hands ; then, with a cry that echoed down the valley, leaped from the bridge and fell with a splash into the shallow water below.

The cry and the leap half sobered the man. He stood for a moment and looked over the bridge. He could see the little body lying part in the water, and part on the muddy flat. With a mighty effort he tried to command himself. He was shaking now like an aspen tree ; great beads of sweat stood on his forehead. He looked round with bleared eyes, and steadying himself by the rail, peered down again. Walter was there ; that was all he knew—he was not capable of the mental effort to reason. He scarcely understood that the child required assistance, but with a sort of brute instinct, he slowly retraced his steps across the bridge, lunging from side to side in a manner that promised to precipitate him into the stream.

He got down to the bed of the gorge at last, but Walter was on the other side. Scrambling over the boulders, he made to cross, and, at the first step into the cool stream, received a shock that cleared his brain a little. In his animal effort to escape from the water, he slid backwards into it. It was only several inches deep, but had the effect of sobering him. His bulky form lay still for a few minutes ; then he scrambled up, dripping

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and soaked, but wide enough awake to know he must cross the bridge, and go down the bank on the other side.

After infinite difficulty his shaking limbs performed this task ; he crawled to where Walter lay, with legs in the shallow water, his body in the mud, his face turned upward. The father peered into the white face, at first stupidly, and then with a fixed horror in his gaze. Once or twice he whispered "Walter," then looked round fearfully. His throat burned, and his head throbbed ; and the wretched man, scooping the water in the hollows of his hands, drank eagerly, and bathed his head in the stream. One awful idea began to pierce through his bemuddled brain and there fix itself, that he had killed his son ; the torture of reflection grew and grew, and, with it, a terrible fear. There was not man enough of him alive yet to feel remorse, only the coward's sense of fear. His soul and mind were still stupefied. He was gazing, with haggard face up and down the stream, with no definite purpose, when his eyes were arrested by the boat fastened to the little landing-place he had made for his wife ten years ago. With an effort he lifted the little body from the mud, and carrying it carefully, laid it down on the bottom of the boat, on a soft carpet of leaves the children had made for themselves. Tottering so that he almost upset the boat, he sat down and

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pulled it into the stream. More by constraint of usage than by an effort of will, he mechanically paddled an oar, but the tide did more for them; it was bearing on to the main stream.

In gruesome silence the boat drifted, the man with horror-stricken eyes keeping watch, now on the unconscious face, now on the phantom-strewn banks between which they glided. At one time they passed beneath the dark shadow of overhanging trees, at another came out into bright moonlight between scintillating cliffs; sometimes bumped upon a snag, at others stuck fast in beds of wild mint. In a region of solitary beauty under the shining moonlit sky the man was alone with his sin; another Eugene Aram seeking a place to hide the witness to it, yet not finding pool deep enough, not forest dark enough to cover it.

Wet, covered with mud, his long beard matted and parted, his eye balls glaring from beneath the hair which had fallen over his forehead, Arthur Searrell looked more beast than man—cowed beast—cowed by terror. Every now and then he lifted one hand, as though to ward off a blow from a fancied captor. Then his nervous excitement grew, and with intense attention he watched the face at the bottom of the boat; hearing a voice all along the stream—a woman's voice—asking him what had he done to the boy?

This delirium had lasted he knew not how long,

ARTHUR SEARELL

when suddenly, as though awaking from a dream, he understood, with a terrible shock, that he had killed his little lad. He fell whimpering and trembling on his knees, in an agony of remorse ; then his whining ceased, and great groans broke from his blanched lips. He was a man again, no longer afraid for himself, but horrified at his crime—and then, merciful God ! he heard a low moan from Walter's lips, and a pleading cry of " Daddy."

Tears coursed down his man's cheeks. He took off his now partially dried coat, which clogged his movements, and made the lad more comfortable. Then he looked round to take his bearings and found he had rowed back almost to the settlement. A mile further on there was a Doctor. He clutched the oars eagerly, and pulled with the vigour of desperation.

An hour later the waning moon and whitening dawn showed Arthur Searell standing at the Doctor's door, with the moaning boy in his arms.

CHAPTER III

DOCTOR STRONG

THE little township of Pareora had been so named after a Pareora in the south, that also was built upon the banks of a river.

The settlement was of the most primitive order, the "town" boasting of only one straggling street, which curved between the crags bordering the river on one side, and green hills on the other; behind which, again, green pastures and fruit plantations spread for miles. Dairy farmhouses of substantial build, thatch-roofed and white-walled, stood among the pastures surrounded by sheltering groves of trees; fat cattle and lazy sheep grazed contentedly, wandering to the foot of a line of precipitous cliffs which edged the horizon beyond.

Above these, far away, dimly discerned among the clouds, or through the haze of distance, were dark mountain peaks.

Civilisation had not much opportunity in Pareora. There was but a suggestion of what its combined forces would ultimately produce. An

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odd-looking hotel of slabs, something after the build of a farmhouse, with exquisitely clean floors, bright gleaming windows and spotless curtains ; a court-house standing 'mid a wealth of wild geraniums ; a white stone post and telegraph office combined ; a dozen or so of shops of more or less importance—from the trimly kept establishment, to the rough shanty boasting only a packing-case for a counter—these were the staple buildings, with the schoolhouse and church, government-built and substantial.

The inhabitants of Pareora were seldom in a hurry. All day long the smiling Maoris squatted or sauntered about barefooted, the heads of the women gaily adorned with bright-hued kerchiefs. The days of their opposition were no longer ; the warriors—those who remained—had grown old, and their descendants were a patient people, and waited to see the *pakeha* raise corn on the land of their heritage. Maori *whares*, built under protecting palm, were scattered among the dwellings of the Europeans. Occasionally a dark-skinned, tattooed, white-haired chieftain would be seen squatting at the doorway, wrapped in his mat ; but the mournful eyes under the heavy brows, the stolid face, revealed no secrets ; he would give a pleasant “ *Tena Koe* ” (Good day) in greeting when the white man passed, and stare as imperturbably as did the wide eyes of his gods from his richly

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carved *whare* portals, to the shining cross on the mission house that glittered among the trees. Tohunga (Maori priest) and Christian missionary ate at one table ; *pakeha* and dark man bought and sold together.

At the end of the main street, where the road turned at the low hill leading to the downs, stood a grey stone house built in bungalow style, with broad, cool verandas to keep off the sun. The house had a trim, well-kept appearance ; the windows, door and verandas were painted green ; a wealth of creeping vine, flowering scarlet and white, tangled about the veranda posts and climbed the thatched roof to the chimneys. There was a mellow, ripe look about the house. It stood on a raised plateau under shelter of protecting crags, with an opulence, if not superabundance, of plantation to keep off the cold winds of winter on the south, and the hot winds of summer on the north.

In a long, whitewashed room in this house Walter lay for many weeks on a surgical bed. Dr. Strong called this room his hospital. It was the largest apartment the house afforded, and had been set apart by the Doctor for any particular case in which he took special interest, and desired to have under his personal supervision.

The boy-patient interested him in no common degree from the first day of his arrival ; his interest being not only scientific but human. Not only

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Walter's physical condition, but also his mental attitude had arrested the man's attention. Not once had the boy complained, but while the bell-birds sang in the trees outside, and the peaches ripened round the open window, he lay still, sometimes half asleep, but oftener watching, with eyes full of longing, and hands folded patiently on the counterpane, the patch of sky visible through the window.

When the Doctor brought his breezy magnetic presence to the bedside, a look of gladness modified the wistfulness, but to the funniest story he listened with a gravity that was disconcerting.

Dr. Strong was a vigorous Englishman of brusque manner and direct speech, his voice coming from a broad full chest. A shock of brown hair adorned a well-shaped head ; he was of muscular build, and looked quite as well qualified to follow a plough as to set a broken bone ; but a certain quick delicacy of touch, and the keen, clear glance of eye justified his pretensions to skill as well as strength. A look of good-humoured intelligence invited confidence ; for, although he judged men with much astuteness, and no plausibility deceived him, he yet had so many theories to account for their idiocrasies that, while he did not shirk the use of the knife when occasion called for it, he also applied the ointment.

When Arthur Searell presented himself at his

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door in the grey dawn, caked with mud, with bloodshot eyes and trembling hands, and told an incoherent, rambling story of how the accident befell, it was clear to the young man's scientific perception as well as to his common sense that the elder man was lying. He hated lies, but regarded liars as a species of lunatic devoid of the moral stamina required for standing by an ugly fact; accordingly in no ambiguous terms, he made the schoolmaster acquainted with the measures he should take, if he—into whose care was committed young minds and bodies—should swerve again from strict sobriety.

"You are not a dipsomaniac, you know," he said with one of his straight looks; "it's a beastly habit you've acquired only lately. For God's sake, go and get a bath!"

To be thus commanded to wash roused Arthur Searell effectually. To what pass had he arrived? There was a sting in the words and in the tone, both harder than any reproach. They impressed him with a sense of degradation. "Go wash," had been said to the lepers of old. He crimsoned under the clay and compressed his weak lips, but turned silently; he had forfeited the prerogative of a gentleman.

When he met the Doctor an hour later the latter's manner had not softened. He had just left his little patient, and the veins in his forehead

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stood out ominously ; his face wore its worst expression, the bushy brows frowning over the keen eyes. Arthur Searell had not the courage to put the question he longed to ask about his son ; he faltered, instead, some plea of isolation in extenuation of his plight.

“ Pooh ! ” said the Doctor, “ rubbish ! I lived in a top attic when I was a poor beggar of a student, and the world viewed from other folk’s kitchen chimneys isn’t inviting to an empty stomach. I’ve lived in a hut in the backwoods, and known dozens of fellows do the same ; but I never knew a man yet with any grit in him, who couldn’t find something better to do than to sit down and snivel over his bad luck. If you can’t—then, hang it ! darn your children’s stockings ! ” And, with a grunt of disgust, the Doctor went off to his study.

“ He has neither intellectual nor moral strength,” he ruminated, when he got there, “ greed and restlessness will be his two determining forces unless I much mistake. I’ll keep my eye on him ; he’ll need some watching ; he’s deteriorating ; he reflected a little virtue and righteousness from the wife ; but that influence has gone.”

He went back to Walter, who with wan face slept profoundly. The Doctor’s face softened as he gazed. The boy had endured his suffering with heroic fortitude.

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The Doctor sighed. It was a sin that anything so physically perfect should be damaged. "I fear it means a crutch for life," he said, half aloud.

"Well," he remarked upon a later day, after closely watching the boy, "I see we're not going to have any crying."

Walter did not answer. He brought his eyes away from the window, where they were fixed watching the tree tops silhouetted against the sky, and let them rest upon the Doctor's face. Dr. Strong resolved, if possible, to break up this silence; the boy had lain irresponsive long enough, listening with gentle impassiveness when spoken to, never showing impatience, never excitement, except when told his father had come to see him; then, with almost horror in his face, he would say quickly,

"No, no, send him away!"

The Doctor's curiosity had been piqued at this invariable reply, and he strove to fathom it; so asked a direct question.

"How did you manage to hurt your hip?"

The unexpected question brought a slight spasm to the small face. It passed immediately, however, and Walter replied easily,

"I jumped off the bridge."

"Why?"

"I shall not tell."

The grey eyes met the blue ones unflinchingly;

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the tones were final ; the half frown meant determination.

“ H'm ! ” said the man.

Dr. Strong's “ H'm's ” were expressive. He had “ H'm's ” of comprehension, “ H'm's ” of affirmation, of query, dissent, disapprobation and condemnation. This came under the first head. He had been positive all along that Arthur Searrell had been at the bottom of the whole affair. He admired the lad for his pluck and determination. He put his hands in his trouser-pockets, and stretching out his legs whistled softly, taking side-long glances at the pale face on the pillow.

“ He's suffered enough to make a man howl,” he thought ; “ yet there he lies in this bare room, staring out of the window without a grumble.”

He followed the lad's gaze. He could see nothing, except the dark tree tops gently swaying in the blue space. He wondered how far the calamity which had befallen the lad would affect his after life ; what potentialities of future power were testified by this strong will and self-control ! He had escaped the father's weakness, and inherited some of the mother's strength of will. In how far would his narrow environment modify his tendencies ? The father was not a healthful associate. Would the lad's lameness repress his courage ? He'd like to see the thing through, he thought, like it awfully. Suppose some one could

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remove the boy from painful association, could his seriousness be broken up? It would be interesting as a scientific experiment—merely as a scientific experiment!

He looked at the impassive face and whistled with a soft inflection. A little brick of a chap: a plucky little lad! Pity he himself would never be the father of such another; but the taint of consumption was in his blood, and he would not commit the crime of its transmission.

“What are you going to do when you’re a man, Sonny?” he asked abruptly.

“Climb all the highest mountains in the world,” was the unexpected answer.

Walter did not give his reason, nor did the Doctor ask for it. He thought of the crutch then being made under his directions, and forbore. Presently he said, “The best things are not always on the heights, my boy. Take my word for it, there’s often gold in the valley.” He looked round the room to make sure that no one but the child was listening; then he continued, clearing his throat:

“I’ve met one or two people who’ve said so anyway. So don’t set your heart too much on the hills.”

The conversation had taken a more serious tone than the Doctor had intended. He was conscious that he coloured.

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"I don't want gold," the boy responded. Then, with a sudden, deep passion, which broke through his calm, burst out : " Oh, I know what I want ! I know what I want !—little Bell ! my sister Isabel ! "

His frame was convulsed with sobs ; when once his restraint had given way, his tears rained fast. The Doctor said a hundred endearing things to him, and, when he had restored him to serenity and gravity, bundled out of the room, installing his housekeeper as nurse.

He drove his gig at a rapid pace over the mile of uneven road between his house and the school-master's.

Hearing the sound of wheels, Arthur Searell came to the door, and, on recognising his visitor, hurried forward anxiously.

"It's all right ; don't look so nervous," said the Doctor, pitying the haggard misery in the man's face. His quick eyes took in the fact that the schoolmaster was clothed and in his right mind. "He's been putting in the deuce of a time," he reflected, as his host courteously, and with an assumption of dignity and calmness he did not feel, led the way into the house and begged his visitor to be seated.

The room bore evidences of woman's hands. In the dim light of early evening it looked almost comfortable.

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"The boy wants to see his sister," said the Doctor in matter-of-fact tones, trying to appear unconscious of Arthur Searell's agitation. Evidently the man feared him, as a criminal fears a judge.

"And to see me also, I presume," he answered, striving vainly to keep from his tones the anxiety he felt.

"You presume too much," answered the Doctor shortly, the sudden picture of the little cripple lying helpless, obliterating his impulse of compassion.

"Sir, your tones are fit for a scoundrel—not for a father."

The Doctor's first sentiment was one of fierceness, the next of contempt. That Arthur Searell should play the double-face with him seemed funny. He darted a lightning glance at the dim figure in the chair opposite. No, he had not been drinking; he could discern that. It was an attempt to restore his own self-respect.

A silence fell between the two men. The Doctor waited for Arthur Searell to take the lead.

"Tell me," came the words of the elder man in a shaking voice; "is it true what I hear—that Jenkins is making my son a crutch?"

"Quite true," was the reply, in the Doctor's gruffest tones, as though the words were forced from him by an unpleasant truth.

"How long will he require it?"

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"Always!"

The Doctor felt the man's shudder. But for that, he sat absolutely motionless.

"Good God!" he breathed at last, and sat like an image of despair. For a long time he made no movement, and the Doctor would not palliate his pain. Let the horror burn into him; it was good that something could penetrate through his vanity and self-satisfaction.

"I shall hear it thud, I shall see him limp, and shall—" Then, as though becoming aware of the Doctor's gaze, he forced the oncoming dread from him, rose, and confronted his visitor with a look of ill-concealed dislike. "Dr. Strong," he said, "your manner, if not your words, is wantonly cruel. Do you think I have no feeling that you seek so impressively to stamp the picture of my lamed son upon my brain?"

He looked appealingly into the face opposite. "I have been thinking about it every hour of every day since that night—" He broke off suddenly, fearful of betraying himself. "What is it you want to say?" he asked doggedly.

Arthur Searell always shrank under disapprobation. He felt that the younger man despised him, and he had a nervous dread of him.

"Simply this," answered the Doctor to his question; "I am willing to believe that you have been suffering from physical breakdown." Then, with

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a stern emphasis, he added, "I don't want to be obtrusive, but, as I warned you before, I warn you again that it will be my duty to report in Wanganui if you are unfit for your duties."

"I have been ill," answered Arthur Searell, hurriedly catching at the excuse offered him; "that is it—ill; but I am quite recovered."

"I wish I could be sure," the Doctor thought.

After a vain conversational effort, Arthur Searell resumed, "I understood you to say that you came for Bell."

Then, going to the door, he called, "Coo-ee, Coo-ee!" and the echoes brought back a faint shrill, sweet answer, "—ing, Daddy!" the first syllable "come" being lost in the distance. A helter-skelter of hurrying feet, a panting and chattering; then a vivid little figure in blue, with auburn hair, and sparkling eyes, stood in the doorway, without shadow of fear, wistfulness, or reproach. She threw herself into her father's arms, dropping a pinafore full of fircones to embrace him.

Both men felt the relief of her breezy entrance. She was a dimpled note of exclamation, and seemed to heighten the effect of life. Concentrated suffering was impossible where she was; she gathered the trailing spirits of the two men in her little hands and wound them round her own bright personality. It was no surprise to see her father's demonstrations of affection. She was absolute satisfaction—gladness made flesh.

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Seated beside the Doctor in his gig, she threw kisses to her father, who stood at the door and watched them off. Then, when he was hidden from view, turned to the Doctor, and, in a rippling chant, interspersed with long-drawn notes of plain-tiveness, confided to him the joys and sorrows of the passing hour.

A humorous expression had softened the lines of the Doctor's mouth when he drew up at the door. He felt curious to see the effect she would have upon the boy—but Walter had heard her voice and called out lustily, "Hallo there!"

Bell made for the voice, head ducked forward. The Doctor left the children to get their greeting over before intruding on them; then he entered the room to find Walter eager and glowing, humanised, and thoroughly awakened.

"Bell the Consoler!" said the man, dropping ripe peaches into her lap.

When the children had eaten all the peaches the Doctor would give them, Bell sat on the floor and, with the dramatic force natural to a child free from self-consciousness, related her experience when she woke up in the early morning of Walter's accident and found herself alone.

She established a natural sympathy between herself and her audience. She met the meditative glance of the Doctor's eyes with frank trustfulness; then threw a bright comprehensive glance at her brother over her shrugged-up shoulder.

CHAPTER IV

FROM WEAKNESS TO WEAKNESS

WHEN it became evident that Dr. Strong had supplanted him in Walter's affections, Arthur Searrell suddenly conceived the desire to reign paramount—but in a weak, womanish way, without why or wherefore. Like all vain natures, he resented his subordination; he felt every slight to his personality, and imagined the Doctor exulted in his influence. He wanted the mastery, and the power that goes with it—not appreciation, or lack of it, weighed and meted out to him according to his merits.

He went with a heavy heart about the irksome duties of school-teaching, but, with an effort, hid his antagonistic feelings, and, playing for an audience of one, made it appear that Dr. Strong had little cause for supervision, or intervention.

But, when at night he could claim freedom, he fed his slumbering jealousy by surreptitious visits to the Doctor's house, and, under cover of the dusk and the vine-enwreathed verandas, peered through the chinks of the blind and tormented

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himself with the sight of the gay contentment of the faces visible within.

The Doctor's study presented a strange medley of workshop, school-room, and nursery. A boy's box of tools, a rag doll and books were scattered about indiscriminately. Sometimes the children were alone, Bell close to Walter's couch, or Sedan chair, but whether Walter read, or worked with his tools, he seemed to feel the spell of her presence and faced her way. Frequently a shaggy head bent towards the children with contemplative or interested eyes, as a spectator at a new play.

The home scene made Arthur Searell angry. It had been his habit to notice, and to forget his children by fits and starts ; but when he saw how the pale face of his son would turn to the Doctor, and brighten into grave enthusiasm, when the young man spoke, he awoke to the fact that, although to be the father of children may be commonplace, to be the originator of their welfare or happiness is more rare.

The first vain jealousy of the unhappy father deepened into a new passion. A consuming desire for the lad's forgiveness awoke in him. He must purge from his memory that most disastrous night. He would win from him not tolerance, but heartfelt and spontaneous affection ; affection like Bell's. He had narrow conceptions of nobility,

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but a dim conviction arose in his mind that this pardon would be his redemption. It was only another form of his lifelong weakness—the necessity of an outward, visible reason, for an inward, invisible effort ; the master need of his nature—appreciation—asserting itself in fresh guise ; but it seemed to him that, when the boy should grow fond of him, all things might be added unto him. He found himself making plans. The stimulus of jealousy buoyed him as the brandy had.

The few persons who met him on his solitary walk to or from Pareora, gave him friendly greetings as they passed, imagining him in quiet enjoyment of the cool air after the day's great heat ; and impressed by the dignity of his tall figure looming through the twilight, turned to look after him with the sympathy for one on whom affliction had laid its hand.

When the boy's nerves had sufficiently recovered from their shock, Dr. Strong gently insisted upon Walter's seeing his father.

"Very well," the lad consented ; and, from then until the interview was over, his forehead wore its strained, puckered look.

The Doctor contrived that there should be no third person at the interview, so that when the father entered the room, he found himself alone with his maimed son, who, propped with pillows in a Sedan chair, was working with his tools at an

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impromptu bench the Doctor had contrived across the chair. The hated crutches rested against the wall.

Walter lifted his head quickly when his father entered. The man met the cold look of the grey eyes, and stopped half way across the room, paled, then coloured like a shy boy. The child's impassive face checked him. He looked hungrily at the pale cheeks, noting the delicate veins in the temples, and the hollows under the eyes, dark tinted by suffering. A rush of contrite emotion surged in the man, he made a movement as though to clasp Walter in his arms, but a perceptible shrinking of the small frame effectually checked the caress. The man had planned a scene which should convince the boy of his love and sorrow ; but, from the first, Walter made advance impossible and ignored the injury received. He had not thought out his cruelty. It was as though the horror and disgrace were too deep to be approached a second time.

"I am carving a bracket for Bell," said the boy ; and their intercourse was taken up from that time as though there had been no tragic episode preceding.

The man stood mutely rebelling against the position. All that he saw was the lad's repulsion. His own agitation was too tremulous to permit him to see what an effort it cost Walter to control

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the tell-tale quivering of his lips, and how the frown between his brows was more of perturbation than disdain. The boy dug his little chisel into his elementary carving and seemed absorbed in it, holding his tool firmly in spite of trembling fingers.

Catching at the nearest straw to gain his son's attention, Arthur Searell extemporised a little speech on the art that was engaging Walter, suggesting a large bench and many tools when he should return, explaining how many ornamental and useful articles might be the product of this talent.

"I should be obliged to do large things standing up," replied the boy ; "I can do only small things, because I must sit down."

It had begun then, the reproach!—the intolerable curse of it! The boy had meant none, he knew—but it was damnable ; he should see him all his life "doing small things—sitting down." Nothing would undo what he had done ; there was no place of repentance for him, though he sought it with tears. Must he be subjective to his son all the days of his life ? Would the one memory swallow up all else ? he asked himself while he walked home with hasty strides ; and fill his days with wearing melancholy—disappearing only to appear again with each succeeding day, so long as he had consciousness ?

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In his lonely room he wept like a woman at the encroaching horror of the thought.

From the hour when Walter returned home with his crutch, his father feared him. Between him and his son a gulf was fixed. Not that Walter cherished any resentment; nor did he fear his father any more; he simply did not love him. The child held himself apart from the man with a quiet reserve that drove Arthur Searell to paroxysms of contrition and despair. If for an hour he forgot his sin, on coming suddenly upon his little son, resting upon his crutch, and with lifted face, looking up wistfully at the impossible peaks—he would remember with a shock.

Thus Bell became more and more the consoler and mediator between the man and the boy. "Father wants you to do so and so," would often bring a thing to pass, when the father could not request, out of sheer nervousness of a refusal.

Life died out of the man's face bit by bit. The Doctor, with all his watching, could detect no cause for complaint. That Arthur Searell controlled himself so long, filled the scientific man with wonder; and, as months passed into years and the schoolmaster filled his post with dignity, showing no sign of his hidden torture, save by stooping shoulders and whitened hair, contempt changed into pity.

Walter regularly sat among the pupils who

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stood in his father's school ; and the father was ever conscious of him ; happy or active—for he was both as his physical strength asserted itself—he was ever a spectre to the man's shifting eyes. If, carried away by an impulse of earnestness, the teacher was led into moral council and spoke of crime, Walter's eyes seemed to say, "Thou art the man," and he would stop short in the middle of a sentence. No advance, however rare, on Walter's side ever bridged the gulf between them. The boy was responsive only to Bell and to the Doctor—and more particularly to the latter. "He *knows*," the boy would always say, "that what he says, *is* so ;" and the father would watch his son,—who sat silent in his presence, listening doubtingly to information—limp away, so soon as free, towards the Doctor's house. The thud of the crutch, the man had dreaded, went quickly from him—but, in returning, halted painfully.

Times past counting, Arthur Searell strained his ears, listening to it die away in the distance ; then he would follow the mile of road, that intervened between his own house and the Doctor's, and examine the round dents the crutch had made. It seemed to him that the distances increased between them as the Doctor's house was neared, and that the boy had leaped to reach it.

For five years Dr. Strong had listened to the coming of the crutch. It had grown to be music

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to him. He never heard it but he called out the Maori welcome, "*Tena Koe*"—to be answered as cheerily, "*Tena Koe*."

To lose that greeting would be to disorganise his day—for it was ever arranged in view of it. The boy answered every challenge magnificently—magnificently, the Doctor declared ; but for the idiocy of the father, which had betrayed him into damaging a splendid specimen, there might have been results unheard of. The infirmity would always be an impediment to progress. The Doctor spent many serious hours in musing on what profession the boy would choose, instructing him meanwhile in a miscellaneous fashion, but with much sincerity, the subjects ranging from the moral essays of Pope to the mixing of drugs.

The Doctor's dispensary was the happy hunting-ground of Walter ; here myths ended in realisation. Lessons in chemistry were delightfully varied with the mysteries of fly and white-bait net making, and the greasier art of cleaning a gun.

Nor was Bell excluded from these pastimes ; her aspiring nose was frequently poked round the dispensary doorway, and with her quick imagination, she found no difficulty in making muddles which took the Doctor hours to rectify. The children's favourite tutor found much occupation for his non-professional hours, for Bell's frequent ebullitions of temper when remonstrated with on her litter,

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and her aptitude for appropriating everything within reach—found plenty of outlet for the instinct of fatherhood that was strong within him.

Bell contrived to abstract a good deal of pleasure from life. Her adaptability to the prevailing mood of the hour, and her susceptibility to affection from every available source, made the days very full and interesting. She had not her brother's gift of comparison, and conflicting statements never puzzled her. Walter liked to be accurate even in his observations. He was a careful historian even of a ramble ; and while Bell's love of adventure was leading her into wandering, Walter, restricted to narrower scope, developed a faculty for painstaking minuteness of observations. His reports the Doctor could take as trustworthy ; Bell's required examining, although they were decidedly more interesting, embellished as they were with imagination as well as humour. Comment and legend were nothing to the boy ; he revelled only in the fact.

" Science," the Doctor thought more and more, " science should claim him."

As Arthur Searell watched his daughter grow , and noted her charm and winsomeness, a new anxiety possessed him that she also would be won from him. The idea, once entertained, grew until it assumed the jealous attributes of his past feeling for his son. The man no longer desired posses-

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sion of the boy's love ; a positive dislike for his grave face conquered all other impulses. From seeking, he had grown to shun him, and hate the sound of the crutches' thud. The man durst not look at him lest the boy should see the gleam of aversion in his eyes. Bell was his refuge. How could he take her away and free himself from supervision, and at the same time benefit his girl ?

Gold !

His eyes gleamed. Gold he must have. Gold from the red earth. Gold in quantities, piled up, running over—and all for Bell. She was a daughter of his father's house, no cold puritanism ran in her veins to assert itself to his accusation.

His eyes began to wander from the faces of his boy students, to fix themselves with a half triumphant, half malignant glance upon that one face at the outside corner of the form. Yes, he would outwit them, Walter and the Doctor both. Let them live for one another, if they would—they should not steal Bell. He would enrich her beyond the dreams of avarice. She should become an accomplished lady—and wipe away his reproach.

His old restlessness returned to him tenfold. He strove to think out how to effect his scheme. The newspapers brought exciting accounts of new gold fields in Southern New Zealand. He decided to go there, and take Bell with him. The gold

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fever was on him again, and ran riot in his brain. The quiet of the little settlement, the solemn majesty of hill and stream maddened him. He saw gold dust in the water, and nuggets shining from the rocks. One hour he was boisterous when, in imagination, he had won the coveted gold, and triumphed over those who thought him a fool ; the next, tears dropped down his haggard cheeks, when he pictured himself frustrated.

Even now, chance made his opportunity. Although his whole soul longed to get away, he could not bring his desire to pass. Torn, as he was, by the tempest of his passion, he could not construct the way of its fulfilment. The Doctor unconsciously did that. He was going away for a holiday and proposed taking Walter with him. He expected Arthur Searell to be aggressive, but found an acquiescence that braced and stimulated.

CHAPTER V

ESCAPE

“ ISOBEL, wake up !”

The white moonlight streaming through the uncurtained windows was changing to the whiter dawn. Uncertain, fitful piping of birds came from the trees, dark save for their silver splashed tops.

“ Bell, sweetheart, wake up !”

The man bent till his grey hairs mingled with the auburn tresses tumbled in confusion upon the pillow. The breath of the child was sweet as cocoa-nut, but she seemed troubled in her dreams, for a short-drawn sigh escaped her. Not many hours before, she had sobbed herself to sleep over Walter's going.

“ Come, Bell, wake up !”

She sat up suddenly, her eyes wide open and expectant.

“ Has Walter come home ?”

But, receiving no answer, she stared in wonder at her father. His face looked ghastly in the merciless white light, his eyes shone feverishly from beneath his brows. His voice trembled with eagerness while he said hurriedly :

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"What say you, if we go away also, and make holiday?—a glorious holiday?"

The night had left its marks upon his face, and the child saw them.

"Are you ill, Daddy?"

"No, not at all; only tired, pet."

"Then lie down beside me and go to sleep." She moved to make room for him.

"No, no," he answered still eagerly, taking her hands with his own that trembled; "we will go away, my Bell, and make holiday."

"You and me, Daddy?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Over the blue sea—bluer than the river—where high mountains are capped with snow. Greenland's icy mountains, my pet, where sunny fountains flow o'er the golden sands!"

The girl stared at this version of Walter's favourite hymn.

"We are going to find gold, Bell—bright gold."

An electric thrill passed from him and communicated itself to her. She was always easily touched and singularly responsive.

"Real gold?"

"Real gold!"

She opened her eyes wide and threw back her head to look at him. The Doctor's training had banished fairy lore and many illusions, but her

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father nodded and smiled at her reassuringly. She looked out of the window.

"Why did you wake me up in the night?" she asked a little peevishly.

"Because we must start early, before the people are up."

"Why?"

"So as not to say good-bye. It isn't pleasant saying good-bye."

It certainly was not. She rested her chin upon her hand and communed with herself. The parting with Walter still affected her disagreeably.

"Shall we come back when Walter and the Doctor come?"

"Yes, yes, certainly," answered the man. "I have written a letter to the Doctor saying that we are going."

He chuckled, thinking of that letter: he felt for it in his pocket; he would post it later; it would surprise the Doctor on his return.

"You are quite sure it is real gold, Daddy?" Bell reiterated with much emphasis, enunciating every word with slow distinctness, more after Walter's manner than her own.

The man reassured her.

"And we shall bring Walter some?"

"When we return we shall bring Walter—gold."

"I'll get up," she said, "and hurry to dress."

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And, while her father waited for her on the veranda, he heard her humming :

“ ——the sunny fountains
Flow o'er the golden sand.”

Before Bell left her room, she pinned a little note for Walter on her pillow ; then, tying on her blue bonnet and cloak, joined her father on the veranda.

“ Wait a minute,” she said, and sped away swiftly, quickly returning with the little iron spade with which, years ago, she had dug for gold.

Arthur Searell lifted a knapsack to his shoulders, and took the child's trusting hand. He had no compunction in taking her away from her little world, and she, in her tender and unpretentious faith, stepped lightly towards the unknown. Her father had told her many stories of goldfields and great fortunes, suppressing his own failure and labour of body and mind ; and she was eager to see what she should see ; but, through it all, she was strangely conscious of a wish to stay.

She stopped when they reached the road, and, turning back, looked at the cottage in the valley only half visible through the white autumn mists. The waning moon was pale against the morning sky ; the dawn, spreading in the east, threw up the outlines of rocks and trees with colourless distinctness. Bell shivered.

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"How cold it is," she whimpered plaintively, nestling closer to the man for warmth. "I wish we had waited till the sun shone ; this frightens me a little."

"We are going to meet the sun," answered the man, with ready optimism. He hurried the child away. He hated to look back ; he was impatient to go forward, to escape from bondage and meet the world, not as he had known it, but as he would have it. In his eagerness his neck stretched forward, he turned to glance neither to right nor left ; yet, when Bell pressed to him, she felt him shivering as with the ague, and she tried to cover his hand with her own little cloak.

They passed through the sleeping village ; its hospitable doors were closed, and fires unlighted. Bell, thinking of those fires, said,

"I should like some breakfast." The idealist beside her expressed no opinion, but hurried her on. Their feet sounded loudly against the loose stones, and the man went tip-toe past the principal buildings in an agony lest he should be discovered ; then, dropping his letter into the post, turned presently towards the downs.

Bell stopped again at the corner and looked at the Doctor's house. It was shuttered and silent, and the fact that her privileges, for the present, were cut off in that direction, made it the easier for her to turn another way. Her inherent love of

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adventure rose at every step ; such an undertaking had never occurred before ; she was going right away with her father to dig for gold, and her fancy wandered more quickly than her feet ; her spirits rising with the rising of the sun, and the circulation of her blood.

The sun came up from behind a bank of amber cloud, and instantly turned the grey, sad scene to one instinct with life and beauty ; leaf and stone, water and grass, were touched one by one with magic. The birds greeted the first rays with joyous twittering ; larks rose from the grass with tuneful song.

“ The cobwebs on the broom seem spun with silver thread,” said Bell, her tongue enloosened with the birds ; and, while she tripped along, now with a hop and a skip, the better to keep time with the striding steps of the man—who even now at their journey’s start forgot to accommodate his strength to hers—she told him tender little stories of young life, and how she had read of loving mother birds that plucked the down from their own breasts to make soft nests for their little ones.

Arthur Searell’s plan was to take a solitary way across country, till he should reach the point where the tributary stream flowed into the Wanganui ; then to proceed by boat to the town of Wanganui. He would not risk rowing down the tributary ; every few yards he was in danger of being met by

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those he knew, and his motive was to baffle the Doctor, who, he felt intuitively, would track him if he could. His absence from school would not be remarked until the expiration of the holidays. With the cunning of partial insanity he sought to evade a keeper. He never felt more keenly than to-day the sweets of liberty ; he was setting himself and his child free from a thralldom that would one day have become as intolerable to her as to himself ! Already that bondage had ceased to exist. He threw back his stooping shoulders and sniffed in the autumn scents. The warm sun poured upon the stubble fields and the dry tussock grass, among which the grasshoppers chirped ; the cliffs were left behind ; autumnal-tinted pastures spread before, and, far away, the thin blue smoke of a farmhouse chimney curled upward, speaking of refreshment for the child.

Her feet were lagging ; the enthusiasm which had been communicated to her was dying through her physical depression ; the eagerness faded from her face and voice ; she did not hug her spade so tightly ; a cloud of hunger had arisen before her vision of the golden sands, and dimmed their lustre. As her father urged her on, she lifted her eyes with sweet reproach ; her lips were trembling and her sunny face was grave when the farmhouse was reached.

After the wayfarers had been regaled with a

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plentiful repast, Bell fell sound asleep on a broad couch near the window. The farm-wife,—a comely matron and the mother of stalwart sons—gently drew down the blind and covered the dusty feet with a shawl, first removing the shoes. This done, she stood looking with that supreme inner tenderness of motherhood. Sleep had restored the bloom to Bell's cheeks, and the harmony of her mind expressed itself in the serenity of her curved lips.

"She's exquisite beautiful," said the woman softly ; "is her mother alive?"

Arthur Searell started. An uneasy feeling stirred within him. He fancied he saw a slight resemblance in the neat woman before him to the Quakerish one long dead. He rose hastily and went to the couch.

"No, her mother died when she was a baby."

"Poor child!" rejoined the woman pityingly, speaking in an undertone, lest she should disturb the sleeper, and inwardly wondering what this dignified gentleman could be doing with one so tender in that rough country, away from coaches and other modes of conveyance.

"Are you going far?"

The man suspected the friendly interest, and answered evasively,

"Not far."

"I'm glad you're not going far," answered the woman ; "she's a tender girl to be on the tramp

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—and girls are best with their woman-folk. A man's well-meanin' enough, but he never knows a woman's feelings—not till she tells him ; an' a tender thing like that don't know rightly what she wants ; a mother 'ud find that out—or any woman, for the matter of that."

Arthur Searell feared something had betrayed him. It must be perceptible to this woman's attentive eyes that he was taking the child away. Pooh ! was he a thief ? The child was his own ! With a caressing touch, the woman lifted a heavy tress of the bronze-tinted hair.

"She's exquisite beautiful," she repeated. "I never had a girl—my children are all boys. Boys are easier to rear. Give them plenty of good vic-tuals and a father as knows how to govern them, and, ten chances to one, they'll turn out right. They make their own life mostly ; but girls is different ; their lives are made for them by the men. They want a deal of care—a deal of care—and this one is exquisite beautiful !"

Arthur Searell soberly acquiesced.

Several days later he and his little girl stood on board a steamship bound for the wild West Coast.

It was towards the close of a rather chilly day three weeks later, when Dr. Strong's gig rattled at a good pace through Pareora. Walter was seated beside him. Both looked bronzed and well. The Doctor had rewarded himself and his com-

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panion for a long spell of work. At every few yards some one called out greetings, bringing ready smiles to the face both of the man and of the boy. The Maori boys, not content, like their elders, with calling out "*Kaipoi*" (Good), "*Tena Koe*," ran after the gig, for Walter was a favourite with them. But, while he returned greetings lustily, his eyes were looking beyond with eager expectancy.

"I wonder where she is?" he said, a note of disappointment in his tones, when, drawing up in front of the Doctor's house, he saw only the figure of the housekeeper on the veranda.

"Hiding, of course!" responded the Doctor quickly, making some haste to alight and assist Walter to the ground. He also had felt a sense of disappointment that Bell was not in view. It was surprising, because she had, he imagined, been notified of their coming.

"Where is my sister?" asked Walter of the housekeeper.

"I have not seen her, Master Walter; but I only came home myself this morning, and I've been busy all day."

A cosy fire was burning in the dining-room, throwing a bright light upon the glass and silver on the table. Bell had been invited for dinner, and her place was set at the Doctor's right hand. Walter looked round the familiar room with a

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glance of affection at the bookcases and the American organ in the corner, and leaned almost caressingly against the Doctor's high-backed, wide-seated leather chair. The room had precious memories for him. It was here that his vague surmisings had been gradually solidified into things "real," and that the wistful expression of his face had given place to the satisfaction of knowledge. In spite of his deformity, he was a tall boy for twelve ; the lines and hollows made by his past illness had long ago curved out ; he was still a grave-faced lad ; but the expression of his large eyes had changed from awe and pitiful wondering to one of earnest intelligence ; he no longer wandered forsaken in quest of knowledge.

The Doctor, coming in and reading the boy's disappointment, said cheerily :

"Never mind ; after dinner I will drive you home ; your father is sure to want to see you."

Just then the man's eyes fell upon Arthur Sear-ell's letter. He knew the handwriting and was impressed instantly with a sense of something wrong. By an effort he controlled his countenance, and opening the envelope, leisurely read :

"Kindly salutations, dear Doctor ! I have long admired your devotion to my son, and his absorption in you—the evolution of such unusual affection has been a most interesting study for me. So much sympathy have I with such tender relations

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that since I contemplate a speedy departure from Pareora, I am reluctant to interfere with them. Accordingly I leave the boy to your care—remaining sincerely yours, ARTHUR SEARELL."

A hot flush spread over the Doctor's face ; rage, alarm, sarcasm chasing one another. Alarm predominated. What had he done with the girl? He understood now the ready assent for the boy to accompany him. Fool that he was to have been off his guard and let this half maniac trick him. He lifted his eyes and looked guardedly at Walter. The boy was watching him intently—and had seen him pale beneath the sun-tan. He waited for the man to speak ; he knew he should hear presently ; the Doctor always told the exact fact. Walter had recognised his father's handwriting, and knew by the expression of the Doctor's face, that the letter did not contain pleasing news.

With growing alarm, man and boy sat down to dinner ; but the man, feeling Walter's interrogative eyes upon him, controlled his face, and broached a dozen topics while he carved. Walter, however, was not a responsive hearer, and the artificial talk fell into silence. At the end of a very unsatisfactory meal the blue eyes and the grey ones met in mutual understanding, and, rising hurriedly, the Doctor said :

"Come, boy," with that rare tenderness of tone and manner invariable towards the lad, and

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that surprised those accustomed to his brusqueness.

While they bowled along in the gig, the Doctor took the opportunity of telling Walter that his father had left Pareora for the time being.

"You are to stay with me. Good news for me, Walter," he said cheerily. The announcement brought from Walter the exclamation :

"But Bell—where is Bell?"

"That's what bothers me, boy; he has taken Bell with him."

"Where?—will they be gone long?"

"I wish I knew," responded the man; "we may discover that at the house."

So soon as Walter's feet touched the ground, he limped quickly along the winding path down which he and his sister had walked so often hand in hand. Its sides were partly overgrown with long and neglected autumn grasses, their heads hanging heavy with seed. The house stood dark under the trees, and, as the boy hurried with painful jerks, tempestuous feelings rose in him and a yearning for sight of Bell.

The door yielded easily; it was not locked, and, when the Doctor struck a match and looked round on the evidences of a hasty flight, a sickening sense of defeat made him angry with himself for so easily having been duped. He had constituted himself a fatherly providence to these children,

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and he resolved that he would move heaven and earth to discover the whereabouts of the girl. His distrust of Arthur Searell was instinctive—the attitude of a strong will towards weakness.

He searched hither and thither for some clue. But Walter had been before him into his sister's room, and was unpinning Bell's note from the pillow. It was scrawled in pencil.

"DEAR WALTER,

"Father is taking me for a short holiday, where Afric's sunny fountains roll o'er the golden sands. It is a great secret. *I shall give you the biggest half* when I come home. ISOBEL."

"Half," muttered the Doctor, reading over Walter's shoulder; "half what? 'Afric's sunny strand.' Why, the fool has gone to Africa! Gold fields. I wish to heaven he'd left the child behind him!"

Little Bell, in her loving impulse to impart her news to her brother, had cut off the Doctor's search for her. "Africa! What a confounded idiot!" he reiterated, forgetting his usual consideration for Walter; then he fell to whistling, seated on the kitchen table, his hands in his pockets, occasionally shaking the hair off his forehead, with a restless, impatient movement of the head. The refrain of his whistle was, "It's better to live with the devil you know, than die with the devil you don't know."

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This was the Doctor's only song, and he sung it exceedingly ill, when he did indulge in singing, roaring out the awful doom that befell the man who fled from domestic infelicity, to be besieged by greater ills. Walter hated the song ; it was the one thing about the Doctor that jarred, and it never failed to produce a disapproving frown. The Doctor saw the frown now, and, with an unreasonable impulse, and much to his own surprise, burst into a roar of laughter. He would have diagnosed a woman so behaving as hysterical.

Walter threw a surprised glance at Dr. Strong ; then turned to look out of the curtainless window, leaning heavily, the while, upon his crutch. The forlorn and weary attitude of the boy checked the mirthless laugh upon the Doctor's lips. He went and stood beside the lad.

Nothing was to be seen but the outlines of bush and rock and a few stars through the scudding clouds. The river made a sullen roar over the boulders. But to both, gazing stupidly out into the gloom, to both, alike unable to express what was in their minds—cast, as they were upon one another—there came the vision of Bell, vividly distinct. Bell playing by the stream ; skipping up the path with tangled auburn hair ; bright-eyed, rosy-lipped, walking soberly beside Walter, suiting her steps to his. Bell the consoler ; the cajoler ; the one glad thing they knew. Bell saying good-

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morning ; Bell saying good-night : Bell singing in church with sweet spontaneous gladness, like the birds, with a trustfulness devoid of fear. Both heard her voice in the intervals between the rush of water and the wind. The boy's breath came in long gasps. The Doctor put his firm hand on the heaving shoulders.

"Sonny," he said, falling naturally into the familiar colonial expression, "it wasn't because I didn't care, I laughed. I care so much that, were I a woman instead of a man, *I* should cry too."

The heaving shoulders moved convulsively.

"Don't, boy ! Understand, my caring is all for you and Bell. For myself I am unfeignedly glad. To-night is a memorable night for me ; it has given me you. Drop that now—do you hear ?—It has given me you, Sonny ; and, God knows, I've coveted you often. It's true enough what your father says, I *have* envied him. *Will* you leave that off ?"

"I have left off !" answered the boy with a gulp.

"Right ; then, listen !" The Doctor's hand was very caressing, despite his tones.

"Your father has installed me as guardian until his return. Like the idea ?"

The keen blue eyes scanned the boy's quivering face searchingly. Walter did not turn, but nodded to the view. The Doctor's scrutiny of the pale profile seemed satisfactory.

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"H'm !" he grunted contentedly ; "so do I. So you cheer up. Bell will be all right. Lord, she'd charm the heart out of a wheelbarrow. There's no good thing in Africa Bell won't wheedle out of it in a fortnight, and, of course, she'll write."

"Yes."

"The time will slip by, and they'll be back. Meanwhile, there are dozens of things—things I want you to do for me, badly."

"I know why you say that," said Walter, removing his gaze from space and looking straight into the Doctor's eyes. Dr. Strong blushed guiltily, and looked thoroughly uncomfortable.

"Oh, indeed !" he managed to say.

"Yes," replied the boy. "I know. You say it because you want me to believe I am of use to you, instead of——"

"Instead of being a burden," put in the Doctor. "Right !"

"I was not going to say that," murmured the boy, with a quick, affectionate glance that made the man's heart leap.

"No ? Well, it is true that you have your opportunities of serving me."

"I'll find the way !" said Walter impetuously.

"I wonder whether he will ?" mused the Doctor, while he sat over the fire that night enjoying a late smoke after the perplexities and emotions of

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the evening. "I wonder whether he will—whether he guesses what it is I want him to do for me. That fool is right for once—I *have* coveted him; and, but for Bell, I should hope never to see the man's face again."

The Doctor sat long after both his pipe and the fire had gone out, viewing the position from both practical and impractical points, in what seemed an interminable discussion with himself. The boy had gladdened his isolation, there was no getting away from the fact—that he would gladden it in the future was equally sure. Action was becoming difficult without the thought of him. If only the man had left Bell also he would have been unfeignedly glad. As it was——

As it was, the thought kept recurring and returning, what would become of Bell? making him ashamed to be glad. And, when near morning he went quietly to Walter's door and heard, instead of the soft breathing of a sleeping boy, a smothered crying, he was touched in his most vulnerable point, and felt humiliated by the boy's grief, because in himself the joy of possession so predominated.

The night on which he had first brought Bell to his home vividly recurred to him. In fancy he could see her seated upon the floor and hear her say: "An' I called out 'Walter' loud—and there was no Walter—an' then I looked up an' saw the

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stars—an' then I eated all the pudding on the table—an' then I went to sleep."

Ah, yes, the child would find her compensations. And whatever love Arthur Searell could give was given to Bell. It pleased the Doctor to think so. It pleased him to remember Bell's sunny temperament, because at the bottom of his heart he had a troubling fear for her,

CHAPTER VI

MINERS' ALLEY

A HUGE valley, dotted with miners' huts and tents, spread between grey, gaunt, snow-capped mountains, at the very base of which a broad river had cut its way.

Beyond the sullyng compass of Miners' Alley the waters ran in limpid ripples, and trout luxuriated in still pools ; but, immediately within reach of the miners, the stream was given over to the washing of precious metal and to the personal cleansing of its finders. A disfiguring water race had been cut along the shoulder of a gigantic mountain ; old shafts and deserted claims in the valley bespoke a season when the desolate storm-scarred peaks had overlooked a scene of human excitement and activity. Much of that fever and excitement was a past tense now, though a share of the activity remained, for even yet the red gold gleamed from the earth, rewarding seekers with occasional success—success only half expected and that never failed to rouse the crowd, as the success of the individual always does, to new enthusiasm.

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A wave of this enthusiasm was passing over Miners' Alley, reawakening it to a feeling almost of awe, for, as late as the day before, a new chum—a beardless boy—had “struck a patch” in an abandoned claim. The lucky find had set the throbbing pulse of expectation beating anew in the heart of every man in Miners' Alley. The excitement had kept the camp awake till daylight crept over the great eastern ranges, when, almost to a man, the miners eagerly sought their claims. Who knew? perhaps, before the sun sank below the western ridge, more great nuggets might be found.

Arthur Searell had listened to tales of luck for half the night, and dreamed of them the other half. He was seated now on a boulder outside the door of his hut facing the stream, his wide-awake hat drawn low over his forehead to keep the slanting sunbeams out of his eyes, his face distorted by greed and passion. His whole frame seemed to have collapsed. Seven years' exposure to sun and wind had bronzed his cheeks; but, even through the tan, he gave the impression that he was ashen pale. His beard was long and ragged, his sunken eyes were bloodshot and gleaming malignantly, and every feature was pinched and contracted by spasms of rage and envy, which further expressed themselves in the clasping and unclasping of his long, lean, covetous

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fingers. He moistened his dry lips occasionally with his tongue, and stifled the imprecations that rose at the thought of the luck that had so long escaped him. For seven years he had tracked rumour from goldfield to goldfield, but he had always been either too early, or too late.

Rough as his attire was—thick boots, a pair of moleskin trousers and a rough woollen shirt—it did not wholly disfigure him ; there was still something about him that distinguished him from the common crowd. “The Gentleman” had been frequently used to designate him—either sarcastically or as a reproach.

He lifted his eyes and gazed vacantly at a group near. An ex-officer of one of Her Majesty’s regiments was engaged in grooming his mare, while a lawyer was employed in boiling a “billy” outside the tent. On the river’s bank a young doctor was filling with tussock grass a bag which he intended for a bed. They were fresh comers, and were talking excitedly of their prospects and the good gold struck yesterday, and of one man who got a pannikin of gold each day, by wading into the river and picking it out of the crevices of the rocks with a sheath knife.

Old tales, but true. The gold-worshipper lifted his head. What had been, might be again. The sun, now high above the mountains, lit up the river, making it shine like the precious metal for

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which the man had given in vain years of hard labour. With an involuntary sigh he rose slowly and walked towards his claim.

Along the winding road beside the river crawled a bullock dray. The yoked oxen were strong and patient animals, and drew their slight burden easily, for the dray was empty, save for a young girl seated upon a pile of hay. The driver walked in the road beside his beasts, whistling while he walked.

The girl upon the hay gazed round her negligently, like one accustomed to the scene; and then, the moment the oxen stopped in front of a whiskey shanty, called by courtesy "the hotel," she jumped lightly to the ground.

Her slender figure was clad in a rough blue serge, but her round throat was bare above a soft snowy kerchief folded across her bosom, fishwife fashion; a broad-brimmed straw hat much the worse for use, and adorned with a blue ribbon, sheltered a face delicately tinted by the sun. The face was seven years older than when the farm-wife had gazed at its sleeping beauty, and the curved lips drooped slightly; a wistfulness had crept into the brown eyes—as though their owner had looked steadfastly afar. Occasionally the expression deepened to one of absorbing expectation, broken, from time to time with little fleeting smiles.

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She went on at a swinging pace, a Maori kit slung over one shoulder, her dress sleeve falling away from her arm and showing its curved wrist. The poise of her head and the way she planted her small, arched foot bespoke some high-born ancestress, and stately halls. She looked like a princess of the mountains, fearless and tender, in the bloom and soft grace and beauty of her youth, instead of a girl who had lived in miners' camps, and wandered from place to place, homeless, save for rude huts. Rough men had been her play-fellows and companions. They themselves had defended her from their roughness. Coarse voices softened when tales were being told of her round camp fires. They spoke of the old man's daughter with shame for the old man, whose trickery was suffered because of her.

Bell stood still for a moment on the bank, before descending to the hut, and looked round at the mountains and the camp that stretched along their sides.

She came with the suddenness of an apparition to the new-comers below. Their feverish talk ceased abruptly. They looked up at her in amazement, themselves hidden among the flax. The ex-officer stifled an oath intended for the mare; the doctor, who felt dirtier and more dilapidated than he had ever felt since he had ruined himself with cards, tugged at an imaginary collar; and

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the lawyer, who had been devoutly thanking the Lord he had seen his last of women for many a day, in a sudden spasm of admiration knocked over the billy it had taken him a good hour to boil, no one reproaching him. The only member of the group who showed no uneasiness was a young man well dressed in a grey tweed knickerbocker suit, who was sitting on a stone giving instructions to the others. He was sun-browned and fair, and gazed with an honest pair of violet-blue eyes straight at the girl in undisguised delight, with that expression of youth to which no good thing is wholly unexpected ; a look more of comradeship than of the reverence that comes with later years.

Before the men had recovered from their emotions, Bell threw back her head and began to sing :—

“ Oh ! father's gone to market town,
He was up before the day :
And Jamie's after robins' nests,
And the man is making hay.
And, whistling down the hollow, goes
The boy that minds the mill,
While mother from the kitchen door
Is calling with a will,
' Pol-ly, Polly, the cows are in the corn !
Pol-ly, Polly, the cows are in the corn ! ' ”

She sang, apparently with no desire, save to sat-

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isfy a need of expression, as though her own gladness in life made it imperative to her to sing. The grace of spring and the poetry of youth were in her voice.

“ From all the misty morning air,
There comes a Summer sound,
A murmur as of water comes
From skies and trees and ground.
The birds they sing upon the wing,
The pigeons bill and coo,
And over hills and hollows
Again that loud halloo :
Pol-ly, Pol-ly, the cows are in the corn.”

She lifted her disengaged hand to her mouth and sent a long, low, musical call far down the cañon—“ Pol-ly, Pol-ly, the cows are in the corn”—then ran swiftly down the bank and stood among the flax.

Bell had seen too many men to be embarrassed ; she looked only surprised. The hut near her father's had remained untenanted so long, that she had not expected to see occupants. She was panting a little from her run, and did not immediately speak ; the men were bowing before her separately and collectively with more gallantry and grace than they had ever dreamed of so far from civilisation. Bell looked from one to the other ; at the young lawyer's clear-cut, clean-shaven face ; at the doctor, the oldest man there, who grumbled in

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his soul about his collarless neck ; and at the well-drilled officer ; her dark eyes lingering over the grey-clad, sun-browned young man. It was done easily and deliberately as a child might look. Then she noted the smouldering ashes of the fire and the overturned billy, the frying-pan lying face downward, and the butter melting in the sun.

"You're new chums," she said, and laughed with voice and eyes. Her tones were of conviction, but the voice had a gentle welcome in it—the welcome that a sojourner in a new land gives to strangers.

"We are all New Zealanders ; I come from the North !"

"Ah !" exclaimed the girl, with a soft intonation of pleasure and surprise, looking intently into the brown young face.

"I am a son of the mountains and streams ; I am a surveyor. My name is Howell—Guy Howell."

The other gentlemen were presented by Guy, half earnestly, half playfully. The lawyer, who had noticed the girl's exclamation of pleasure, said :

"You come from the North Island also ?"

"Yes, that is my home ; I haven't seen it for years."

She put as much emphasis on the last word as though she were quite old. The men noted it, and

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wondered what she was doing in Miners' Alley. She took it for granted that her appearance there was natural, and throwing the kit off her shoulder, went down on her knees and proceeded to mend the fire, talking meanwhile, and directing at the same time.

"Bring me some sticks."

Guy flew to her bidding. "Fill this from the crock outside my father's hut—there on the bank."

The officer, although somewhat stout, was back promptly. The bearded doctor was eager for his orders.

"Bring me that kit."

She opened it and smiled into his eyes frankly :—

"See ? eels !"

The men peered into the kit with interest.

"Further along the river is full of fish. I set an eel-pot sometimes at night, and go in the morning to get the fish. I went this morning. There are trout too ; I often catch them in the small pools. The river is beautiful outside the camp," she added a little eagerly. "It flows deep and strong. Icy cold too ; it is snow water from the mountains."

She nodded towards the white peaks shining in the distance, but the men looked only at her. She had thrown off her hat, and was proceeding to dress the fish. The breeze blew the curling ten-

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drills of her hair off her white forehead. She looked a child still—a child with a woman's wonderful patience in her eyes.

"Don't you find your life dull?" asked the doctor gently.

She looked at him with a wistful expression he did not understand; his age seemed to bring him nearer to her than did the others. Unconsciously she spoke to him in the caressing tones she used to her father:—

"Sometimes I am a little lonely, but my father has promised to take me away."

"North? Home?" asked Guy, leaning on his elbow and leaning towards her, the lawyer taking the vacated post at the fire.

"Yes—North."

"You love the North!" affirmed the doctor.

"Ah yes! it is warmer than the South Island, and the flowers are lovely—you know that!" she added, glancing at Guy. "When I lived there I was quite small. My father is a gentleman," she proceeded, lifting her head slightly, a tone of defence in her voice, as though accustomed to hear the fact disputed. "He was unfortunate, and came to the diggings. That is our hut!"

They noted, at the small windows, the muslin curtains tied with scarlet ribbon, and remembered Arthur Searell sitting outside. "The old man's daughter," thought they. A child not to be imag-

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ined among these brutal, rough and harsh surroundings, yet, with her innocence and purity, victorious over them.

The lawyer felt ashamed of his latest criticism of woman. The cynical expression of his face relaxed. As for the doctor, he remembered his defence of the sex with a glow of pride, and forgot about his collar. He drew nearer, with a consciousness of virtue.

"We've lived here for two years now," continued the fresh young voice; "before that we lived on other goldfields." Then, as though detecting the sadness and regret her tones conveyed, fearful lest these strangers should attach blame to anybody, she sought to correct the misconception.

"It's grand!" she said, rising and pointing towards the valley, with charming grace, her face lighted with enthusiasm, "when the miners' huts are lit at night; the light streams from the open doorways and shines through the windows like golden stars. Then we sit round camp-fires and tell stories; and, sometimes, I read to the men. I'm pretty good at roughing it; I always was a strong girl. When I was quite, quite young, I lived almost in the open air."

She sat down near Guy, and talked to him softly, as though she had forgotten the others.

"You know what camping in the open means;

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after the long day's tramp how soundly one sleeps on the bracken by the stream, and how the wind sounds through the reeds, like an organ in church one heard when a child—a drowsy little child, half awake and half asleep. Or, near the sea, how one lies and hears the waves lap with a soft rippling sound, and the night birds calling like lonely children—listen !”

She put her small brown hand to her mouth, and gave a faint, far-off, plaintive cry like night birds in the bush. “And one answers them back—so.”

The billy was boiling over unheeded ; the lawyer had abandoned his post.

“By Jove !” exclaimed the officer, who loved a good performance. Bell laughed merrily ; then from her lips rippled the notes of bell-birds in the glad summer morning.

“Know them ?” she asked Guy, putting her hand on his coat sleeve. The doctor wished he had happened to be sitting just there—it was so long a time since a girl had put her hand upon his arm.

“Yes,” said Guy, laughing with pleasure, and colouring because of the hand, “and I’ve heard the hail pelt on my tent with only the thin canvas between me and the Sou’-Wester ; and I’ve seen the clouds through wet sea spray ; and huddled in a corner of the ranges with the mist rolling below me like sea billows—”

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"And heard the gorges thunder down the mountain sides!" interrupted Bell. "Ah! I know you're laughing at me—but you love it for all that. You look like a man who has walked long distances, and would not shrink from wild storms or biting winds."

Guy coloured like a girl, and the other men looked at him critically. It was true enough, he was a strapping young fellow. They had fallen in with him only last night, and couldn't say much for him one way or the other.

Bell jumped to her feet suddenly.

"Come, boys," she said, "where's the frying-pan? You must be dying for some food."

She proceeded to fry the fish carefully, not speaking any more, but softly whistling, "Polly, the cows are in the corn." She dished the fish, while the doctor made the tea; then, before they knew her intention, she had wished them good luck and left them. "By Jove!" said the officer again, looking interrogatively at the others.

"She must think us beastly rude," said the lawyer; "she has cooked her own fish for us, and nobody thanked her."

No one answered. Guy was looking at his coat sleeve and whistling softly the refrain of the girl's song.

Bell did not enter her father's hut, but made a short detour, walking slowly; then climbing the

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bank, sat down among the bracken. She dropped her chin upon her hands, looked wistfully at the most distant mountain rim and sighed impatiently. Fleeting shadows passed across her face. The meeting with strangers had affected her. It had brought home near—the home from which her father had persistently kept aloof—first coaxing Bell to hold no communication, then insisting upon silence. He had his reasons; he would explain them one day, he had assured her. Meanwhile she waited—and watched him. She knew things that made her tremble, but she clung to him, and pleaded with him. Soon, he said, very soon his luck would change; and he would take her home. He must wait for it a little longer. She would not leave him alone? She was the only one who loved him, his only dear. It was for her sake he sought wealth.

Long ago she had hidden away her little spade—the spade she had brought to dig gold for Walter—Walter who was a man now. She felt a little nervous when she thought of him; would he and Dr. Strong blame her for hiding with her father? Her father, who must have some terrible reason for keeping away. She had grown familiar with the thought of crime, but, with her opening view of life, she dreaded degradation for him and for herself. She had seen one man arrested, an old man; he had struggled and screamed like a woman, and

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her pity had been strong. But now, new thought—the breath brought by these strangers from the world behind the mountains—stirred in her veins like wine ; she realised that that world had judgments other than those of a miners' camp ; how would she stand before those judgments ? what position would be assigned to her in that world ?

The uncertainty grew to dread. She must know. Was she the daughter of an outlaw, or free to face that outer world without shame ?

She bowed her head in anxious questioning, wondering how it was that hitherto she had never troubled herself to find answers, why it seemed that a new magic might come into life ?

And then, from among the flax, she heard her own song in a fresh, rich baritone.

Bell bent further forward, a smile upon her lips.

“ Oh, wild the birds are singing in
The woodland on the hill.”

She was startled from her listening attitude by the crunching of the bracken. She looked up and said softly, “ Listen, Ralph !”

“ And whistling down the hollow goes
The boy that minds the mill.”

The youth stood stolidly by, like one used to wait. He was about twenty, and had that unmistakable look of one who from childhood has worked hard—the weary droop of the shoulders,

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the hard, deformed hands. His shoulders were broad, he had the square forehead of the mechanic. The hair and eyes were both dark brown, the eyes being the most expressive feature of his face, alternating in expression between deep melancholy and intense passion. His mouth closed with decisive curves ; his nose was straight, with delicate nostrils—a nose that belonged to a temperament ambitious and sensitive. It was a strong face and gave indication of determination, as well as of patience. The dark eyes were fixed upon Bell, listening dreamily to the voice among the flax, now singing a song she had never heard before.

“Who’s that ?” asked the youth, in a sharp, toneless voice, flashing a glance towards the unseen singer, as though he scented an enemy.

“I *think*,” answered Bell, with a catch in her breath, and a half-drawn sigh of satisfaction, “I think he is a stranger named Guy Howell.”

“How do you know his name ?”

He glanced eagerly at Bell, then shot another dark, defiant look at the flax.

“He told me—just now.”

Ralph stood in front of Bell, looking at her bright hair.

“You always *will* speak to strangers,” he said sullenly.

“I spoke to you when you were a stranger.”

That was true. The gentle reminder reproached

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him. Ralph remembered the occasion well ; it was on the first night of his arrival at the camp. He was leaning forlornly against the door of the whiskey shanty waiting for his father to finish his orgie within ; the strangeness of the scene and his own helplessness to check his father's drunkenness had culminated in an impulse to cry, when a slight girl had stood in front of him and said, " Are you waiting for any one inside ?" and a pair of soft brown eyes had looked into his own inquiringly.

" Yes," he had replied. " My father !"

" I'm waiting for my father also," she had answered simply. " I'd rather wait outside. Sometimes I go in and sing to the men, but not often ; it is so smoky and stuffy ! You look lonely ; I feel a bit lonely myself sometimes. If you like, I'll stay and talk to you."

They had done a good deal of talking since then—she particularly—he listening sometimes in mute antagonism, for the things of which Bell talked separated them in an indefinable way. He served, however, with a service that was an art, for the object of it was kept unconscious that she received it. The fact that both were motherless, and both protectors of the parent who should have shielded them, was a mutual bond ; and, though one day Bell must tread paths Ralph's feet would never press, she, meanwhile, had infused in him some cheerfulness.

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Bell's interest in the stranger had brought back to him the troubling thought of his own inequality. He wanted to bestow—to be the one to benefit. That was his mental attitude ; yet, from the first, Bell had been the bestower.

He sat down beside her on the grass.

"It real disgusts me, Bell, that I can't please you better," he said slowly.

"You please me well enough," answered she carelessly, still listening to the voice below.

"You're as kind as kind can be."

"Bein' kind don't make a man clever, nor take the stoop out of 'is shoulders, nor alter the shape of 'is hands an' feet—nor put a song in 'is throat."

Bell took one of his rough hands and patted it.

"You are very discontented to-day, Ralph. Why?"

"Discontented, am I?"

He laughed with a lump in his throat. "P'r'aps I am. It's hard to be anythin' else, me bein' what I am."

"Ralph," said Bell, looking at him for the first time, and speaking soothingly, "what is troubling you, dear?"

"You are."

"I?"

"Yes, you, Bell," he answered clumsily. "I can never rest for the fear of losin' you. Everythin' seems to separate us. My own ignorance ;

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your own sweetness ; your old home you pine for ; all the things that belong to you. The way you talk ; the things you like——”

“ Why, Ralph, these things used to please you once,” she said reproachfully.

“ Aye, dear,” he replied in his slow, uncertain way, as though picking his words with difficulty ; “ everythin’ belongin’ to you pleased me once. That was when I didn’t care so much. I liked you well enough to see you happy, not carin’ what made you so. I care in a different way now. I grudge other people givin’ you the pleasure I can’t give. I want to be everythin’ to you—an’ I’m nothin’ at all—nothin’ !”

“ That’s not true, Ralph, you are a very great deal to me.”

“ Not so much but that, after a time, things would be all right without me. An’ it’s natural an’ right they should.”

“ When I go away, dear, I shall think of you always, wherever I may be.”

“ It won’t be thinkin’ only, for me,” he replied ; “ it will be like comin’ to a camp an’ findin’ all the men dead ; an’ only cold ashes where the fires used to be. It will be like a long thirsty day’s tramp, an’ reachin’ the creek at sundown to find it dry. It will be like gettin’ lost in the bush an’ walkin’ round an’ round till one drops——”

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"Hark!" said Bell, smiling; "hasn't Guy Howell got a beautiful voice?"

"Yes," answered Ralph, trying to conquer a sudden pang as he peered over his shoulder towards the flax. "He's got a way of saying things that make folks listen."

"I noticed that," responded Bell eagerly, and she wondered why Ralph laughed so harshly, when a rich baritone called gently, "Pol-ly, Pol-ly, the cows are in the corn."

CHAPTER VII

THE CAMP AT NIGHTFALL

It was not quite dark yet ; the sunset colours still lingered over the naked peaks that stood out grimly against the soft radiance of the sky, lightened in patches by the silver of isolated stars. A cheery glow of lamps and firelight spread along the river from the miners' huts. The river, cold and calm from its source in some glacier far up among the snows, flowed through the camp, which slumbered in the gloaming, peacefully as a village at evening prayer. There was no indication of the smouldering discontent, dislike, and superstition that with still more evil emotions waited only for an impetus to break into universal passion.

On the lower hills the trees were dimly silhouetted, and beneath them the darker flax gleamed where it caught the light through an open door.

A few footsteps were audible on the roadway, and Bell stood at the door, listening, her figure thrown out into bold relief against the ruddy light within. She stood very still—not leaning against the door-

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way for support, but self-poised, with her hands clasped before her in a pathetic attitude of unwearied waiting.

The dim shapes and shadows did not frighten her ; she had seen the sun go down in lonelier places than this ; her soft eyes had watched it set behind mountains which rose sheer out of the sea, and through the mist of the perpetually breaking surf on the wild coast ; she had watched the twilight grow to pitchy blackness in trackless forests. It had been her daily life to hear of the discovery of great riches, of wild deeds and tragic deaths, and to witness the mad excitement that attended Fortune's turns ; the romance of the wandering and adventure had stirred her blood. But the pulse of the woman had now begun to beat, so gently at first, that she scarcely knew it ; and the child who had cared for nothing but the rare delight of her glorious freedom, now felt vague homesickness, disturbance and a rush of thought. The Great Mother, Nature, had taken the untaught girl in hand, and imposed the discipline of womanhood upon her.

From among the tangle and chaos of her new emotions one thought issued—"home." She wished for a small world of her own, with its special environment and education. Instinct would not efface itself ; and the father, who had counted on her sympathy in an eternal wandering,

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had counted without that instinct which has been the nest-maker from the beginning.

Bell heard him coming now, and went out a little way to meet him. The sweetness of her friendship, the charm of their mutual understanding had never failed. Her sympathetic understanding had been his perpetual joy ; she had ever entered into his plan, his aim.

She tended him now with personal humility, and, when he had finished his evening meal, she drew his rough chair—cushioned by her hands—close to the glowing hearth, and, sitting down on a stool at his feet, where the glow from the logs fell over her face and hair, she drew his arm about her shoulders and caressed his rough, disfigured hand.

“ It was white once,” she said, laying her soft, smooth cheek upon it. “ I can’t remember when, but I know it was white once, dear hand !”

Arthur Searell looked down at her contemplative eyes fixed upon the fire. There were traces of weeping about the lids, and a feeling of commiseration swept over the man—an old half-forgotten tenderness. He noticed, for the first time, the rounded outlines of her figure. He was startled to find his little girl had changed. Through her womanhood he caught a glimpse of himself as he had been.

“ Has any one vexed you ?” he asked hurriedly,

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waiting for her answer with more concern than he had ever shown before.

She did not laugh back merrily as usual. She nodded her head several times slowly in acceptance of the suggestion.

"I have vexed myself!" she replied.

That was a very little matter.

"How so?" he asked, relief in his tones. Something had oppressed him with the fear that she had things of greater import to reveal.

"I have vexed myself with thoughts of you, Daddy."

"Are you getting nervous?" he replied, a little fretfully. He began by some instinct to divine that she had not yet said what she meant to say. "It is not like my Bell to fear."

"Fear!" she exclaimed scornfully, looking straight into the bloodshot, watching eyes. "Fear—I?"

The coward shrank a little under the scorn her eyes revealed. Suddenly her look fell. "But yes, I do fear," she proceeded—"not the things I know and see, but those I don't know and do not see." She went down upon her knees in front of his chair and peered up into his face. "Father," she asked earnestly, "what are you?"

The logs in the hearth dropped with a dull thud, extinguishing the flame. The man shrank back a little. It was the first time he had shrunk from

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her. The darkness hid a spasm of aversion that passed over his face ; his love suffered diminution the moment she seemed to accuse.

Bell took his ragged beard in her hand, and very gently drew down his face till it was on a level with her own. For a moment she was startled when she met his gleaming eyes. They seemed in the darkness to burn like those of an animal.

" Father," she said, and her voice shook a little in fear, not of him, but at her own boldness, " I have been very miserable since the morning. A terrible thought has taken possession of me that—that, perhaps, you are in hiding for a sin against the law. I don't know how the fear came into my head, but it has grown all day. A little while ago even that wouldn't have made any difference to me, but somehow, lately, I have wanted so much to be like other girls, to be able to take my place among women ; and, when you put me off with excuse after excuse why I must not go home—or even tell them—tell Walter and the Doctor where we are, I can't help it, Daddy, if I think terrible things."

Arthur Searell was astonished—but he was relieved. For a moment he behaved like a gentleman ; he lifted his trembling daughter from the floor and seated her in his chair ; then he stirred the fire into a blaze ; and then, standing where the flames threw a mocking caricature of himself

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on the rudely plastered walls, he told the tale of that night long ago when he had lamed his son. He told the story in all its pathos, for he told it truthfully. Bell had seen him drunk before now, and he felt the irony, dulled as his finer feelings were, that he had less shame in this telling than in the sight of his son. Where he lied he lied unconsciously, for the exaggerated account he gave of Walter's unforgiveness and the Doctor's hardness had for long seemed the truth to him. He dwelt upon the futility of his long repentance and would-be reparation, and since he talked with consummate art, relieving his imaginary ills, the wide-eyed girl, watching him through her love, did not connect his pity for himself with cowardice ; in her eyes he was not a man who had bartered honour and truth through greed, and sacrificed his daughter to selfishness and avarice. She saw him only as he pictured himself—a man who had endured hunger and cold and hardship to win a place for her.

She slipped off her seat and wound her arms about his neck, and mingled pitying tears with those born of his weakness. Yes, she would abide. She was so glad, so grateful that her father was still a man of honour in her eyes. One day, she would show Walter what manner of man their father was.

An hour later Arthur Searell went down the hill—walking with difficulty—towards the camp,

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where he had gambled every nugget he had ever possessed. Once beyond the reach of Bell's clear eyes, he slipped into the very rags of himself—he behaved to no other as he behaved to her. The strength of her mind, the magnetism of her presence checked and controlled him. The mutilation of self had been going on in him apace ; he had been sinking gradually into darkness, and only emerged from it at her call. The craving for excitement had grown with its gratification, and anything which did not appeal to its appetite was disagreeable and unwelcome to him. He had justified his actions to Bell, and was assured again of her devotion. He had lost all loftiness of heart and was piqued and irritated by anything that checked him, like a peevish child at the reproach of its mother.

Everything in his environment had tended to develop those potencies of evil, derived from no one knew where, and to destroy the tendencies to good his Puritan wife had loved. With no restraint but a simple child, and no responsibilities but such as a miners' camp imposed, seven years had wrought a significant evolution. With old age his vital force diminished, and his moral debility had developed to disease. The deadly forces of degradation at work had brought him to the pass where a man can slip from the sin against the individual to the sin against society.

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Ralph Morton knew that, boy as he was, and watched continually—watched with eyes grown big with seeing. He had no lofty ideal of life for life's own sake ; his lot had been cast where little value is placed on life. What happened to Bell's father mattered only because of Bell. If a blight should come on her, it seemed to Ralph that it would send a blight down the generations. Ralph's own father was addicted to intemperance and other vices, as sand to the sucking in of water. Jim Morton had never had the remotest idea of what constituted right or wrong ; he did both from the same motive—the impulse of the moment—and flourished astonishingly. He was a trifle bloated with beer, and had an occasional dread of apoplexy, but he dreaded nothing else—except perhaps his son, who had exhibited on occasions a will, which the perturbed parent had designated as “damned doggedness,” and a temper violent enough to scare the unprincipled Jim into hurried honesty.

The rigid virtues of the son continued to be subject matter of unfeigned astonishment to the father, who had never before seen anything like it in the family. There was a tradition that Ralph's grandfather had been a hero and had given his life to save life in a storm ; but that was only hearsay ; and that Ralph should stand alone, the one honourable member of the family he had personally

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known, seemed almost pathetic to Jim. It made his son appear eccentric, and Jim gave him no applause. Ralph's singular want of enterprise did not arise from cowardice, for, although he did not go astray himself, he had an aptitude for bearing the punishment with evil-doers. His father could only hope that time would change him, and that he would grow out of it.

The dawn of Bell upon the boy's horizon had been like the rising of the blessed sun after a dark night. She was the rectification of his soul's assertion of goodness. The defiance in his heart was lulled—the defiance of a cheated nature, a nature made for large things, and held in iron chains to a small cell; an instinct to plan and achieve stripped of all implements of accomplishment. An impulse to worship, but with no shrine at which to satisfy that impulse till Bell stood before him. Then came a gradual knowledge of things sweet and delectable. She brought a Land of Promise to his view, and then later, like Moses, he knew that he might not enter.

At first he had not thought of this; to know of the grapes was enough for him. He became educated to the fact by slow degrees—while she taught him other things—that between him and her was a great gulf fixed. He was the son of a criminal, and she was—Bell.

The instinct of happiness was as strong in him

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as it is in every heart—stronger for the repression—and it cried out for its fulfilment. As he understood it, there was but one fulfilment, and that was Bell. He had no intellectual reflective power to aid him. He was very ignorant, and could not see far. He understood a little rough engineering, such work as was needed at the mines, and he understood being honest and how to take care of Bell. Beyond that, Miners' Alley had few possibilities, at least for him. He had had his dreams, like other folk, of what he might have done, had knowledge been given him ; he dreamed sometimes now of some metamorphosis which might change him into a man who had achieved. Bell thought him clever, but she measured him by the men she knew. He understood that he was precluded by ignorance from taking a place at her side.

Bell slipped out of the door, and made for the road on the bank. As she did so there was a rustle of the flax, and a dark figure stepped to her side.

" You here, Ralph ?" she said easily, and not at all surprised ; she scarcely would have been astonished, even had she known how many long night watches Ralph kept, although she would have laughed at the thought of danger ; for there were forms of evil of which she was ignorant.

The young man stepped forward awkwardly, shy in the new knowledge that had come to him ;

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and with perceptible hesitation stammered some reason for his proximity.

"I'm glad you're here," answered Bell brightly. "I want to walk a little way towards the camp, and I want company, somebody to talk to. I feel I must talk. I'm so glad to-night, Ralph, I can't keep still."

He looked at her sideways, but could not see her expression in the dim light. Her glad voice communicated a sudden fear to him. "You are going away?" he asked anxiously.

The sweet, cool air and the girl's thoughts had brought a vivid colour into her cheeks and brightness to her eyes. Ralph could feel this; feel also the magnetism of her smile.

"No," she replied, "we are not going away; not yet, at least; but to-night father and I had a long talk. He told me the reason he left for here, and oh, Ralph, it is not disgrace somehow. I began to fear it was—disgrace to him."

"And you couldn't abide that?"

His tones were abrupt, but they were the tones of conviction, touched, too, with a little fear.

"Why—no," answered Bell slowly, coming close to Ralph and linking her arm through his. "Not for *him*, dear;" she remembered Ralph's father, and felt some difficulty in putting it. "It would kill him. He was born for good things, and he

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has had so many disappointments, and he is an old man now. Old folks have no chance to outlive disgrace or trouble ; it snaps them like a withered tree in a storm. If trouble came to you or me, it would only bend us ; there are such a lot of springs to youth—so many seasons of leaves to cover up the scars. After the winter we could begin our new life, our new spring.”

Ralph had never before heard Bell speak so passionately. He was silent, not knowing what to answer. His self-appointed task of taking care of the old man became of more import even than it had been. He looked anxiously towards the lighted huts. An hour ago he had left Arthur Searell playing cards with his (Ralph's) own father and a few other choice spirits ; they were then sober, and there seemed no immediate cause for uneasiness.

After a pause Ralph thrust his hands into his trousers' pockets and said abruptly : “ I'd try and coax the old man out of this if I was you ; 'is luck seems out, and 'e'd be best away.” He drew a little nearer to the girl. “ This mornin' I wished you'd never go, 'cause I must stay with my gov'-nor. I *could* leave 'im, of course ; there ain't no one to say as 'ow I shan't, but Lord ! if I was to go 'e'd be up to larks in a jiffy. He 'ates havin' me knockin' around,” Ralph proceeded with a

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bitter laugh ; " but I keep a hold on 'im in spite of 'isself."

" I like you for that. I've always liked you for that," exclaimed Bell, with one of her caressing pats on Ralph's coat sleeve.

Her touch and approbation made his lips tremble. Neither of them appeared to see the irony of their position ; fathers needed guardianship at Miners' Alley.

" I said this mornin'," proceeded Ralph, " as how it would seem like dyin' if you was to go ; but I repent of sayin' that to you, my dear, for I knows, none better, that he—your old man—ain't well——" He felt the start of the girl, and the hurried movement of her hand, and he pulled up.

" This kind o' life ain't suited for 'im," he added conclusively.

If Bell's father was to be saved from the disgrace she dreaded for him, Bell must be alarmed, and so accomplish his going. Ralph dared hardly raise his eyes while giving this advice ; his heart swelled with a bitter pain, for he realised how utterly acceptable his words were to Bell. She touched his shoulder with her cheek.

" It does make me happy to hear you speak like that," she said softly ; " for now I know you will help me to persuade him. He will listen to you, you *make* him ; I have noticed it frequently. He pretends, as Jim Morton does, to take no notice,

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because you are a boy ; but he does notice. I cannot speak to any one else about him, Ralph."

Ralph drew himself up, and with forced cheerfulness rejoined : " You can say just what you like to me, my dear."

" I have known that for a long time now. And oh ! Ralph, when I have got him home—and perhaps in not a long time from now, when Walter and the Doctor have forgotten to be angry with him—and you can leave your father, you will come and see us, Ralph. I have always been fond of you, dear ; and it will pain me to be always wondering how you do, if I do not hear. You have been so good to me, and if you never write or come, I shall always see your face, as I saw it this morning, so reproachful and unhappy. I want you to be friends with me all my life ; will you, dear ?"

He turned away. There was only such a little time to be with her, and then Bell would not need him. A wild wish went up that something might happen that she should need him all her life. He closed his eyes and shut out the mining scene, and sent his mind on into the vague distance, and saw himself always necessary to her. He felt the appealing touch of her hand upon his shoulder. He hardly dared breathe, lest he should awake from the spell.

Before he could answer calmly, and while Bell's words were still lingering in his ears, she removed

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her hand and assumed a listening attitude. Faintly on the still air came the sound of approaching footsteps, and the humming of the voice that had disturbed him in the morning. A tall, straight figure halted. Against the starlit horizon Ralph could see its well-made outline. The trim suit of tweed, the spontaneous courtesy with which Guy snatched off his cap, emphasised to himself Ralph's clumsiness and awkwardness, and in a moment he felt exiled again and impotently rebelling.

"Oh!" cried Bell, in her animated, gracious way, "it is you!"

She had relinquished her clasp on Ralph's arm, and gone a step to meet the stranger. Ralph stood where he was, kicking one heel against the other.

"I am fortunate to meet you," said Guy, with eager pleasure. "Let me thank you for your kindness of this morning before I go."

Go! He was going then. Ralph lifted up his head. It was easier to relinquish Bell of his own act, than to stand by and see another man put them apart. Although she had never been more inaccessible than to-night, she yet exercised her pretty queenship on no other, and he was jealous of the privilege of serving her.

His eyes roamed restlessly over the two young figures. If he had dared, he would have stepped in between.

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"Go!" he heard Bell exclaim, a little note of half-stifled regret in her voice.

"Yes," answered Guy, with an accent of uncertainty, and moving a little nearer to Bell; "I only accompanied my friends to see the camp. I am not a miner, you know. Business calls me North."

By the sound of her voice, Ralph knew that Bell thrilled.

"You are going home?"

"Yes; can I convey any message for you?"

His tones grew more eager, and Ralph's heart fluttered.

"No, thanks, except to the river; give my love to the Wanganui."

"Happy Wanganui!" he responded, half laughingly.

Ralph saw Bell draw back slightly, and in a colder manner than she had yet spoken, she said: "Good-night, I wish you a pleasant journey."

She stepped lightly forward, and, like a faithful dog watching for his signal, Ralph sprang to her side.

Guy hesitated for a moment, then made a step, as though to follow; then stopped. Bell looked back and stopped also. Guy hurried up.

"Will you shake hands?" he asked in a low tone, so low that Ralph, a yard or two away, could not hear what he had said; but he saw Bell place

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her hand in the stranger's ; then she came slowly back. She took his arm mechanically, and presently began to hum softly,

“ And whistling down the hollow goes
The boy that minds the mill.”

The girl felt uplifted and happy. The weight of the morning had gone. She had no more fear that she might be shamed by being called the daughter of her father. Something of stateliness came into her step and bearing. Her mood was one of sympathy with the grandeur around her.

“ It is a glorious night,” she said presently, throwing back her shoulders and lifting her fair head. “ This cool breeze is like a tonic ; it makes one strong and courageous. Lift up your head, Ralph, and draw in long breaths. Listen how all the leaves of the trees are clapping their hands together. Hark !—is that the river ?”

CHAPTER VIII

PLAYED OUT

THEY stood still and listened. The sound came from the direction of the camp ; a dull roar as of voices rising higher every moment, mingled with the thud and struggle of hurrying feet.

The moon had risen above the mountains, and threw glistening patches of silver upon the river, and the rough, uneven road that wound from it. Suddenly upon the serene landscape there rushed into view—running as if for life—two figures Ralph and Bell knew well, followed closely by a pursuing crowd of hooting men, their sheath knives flashing in the moonlight.

The man in front sped on swiftly with outstretched hands, the shorter figure close behind. Every moment the pursuers gained upon the fugitives.

Ralph and Bell exchanged swift looks—the girl's face expressing horror and alarm. Without a word, both ran forward, Ralph in advance. The figure swiftly approaching shot past Ralph ; panting, out of breath, exhausted ; and clutched Bell

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for support, with a look as if imploring aid. Every muscle in his face and neck was strained—his face hideous in its ghastly fear, his eye-balls starting from their sockets.

Bell instinctively threw her arms about her father, and looked apprehensively over her shoulder.

The pursuers had stopped at a short distance ; there was a hubbub of voices, a derisive laugh or two ; then the men clustered to one point and stooped down. With an involuntary movement Bell broke from her father's clutch, and, with swift steps, joined the group, her heart sinking with vague dread.

Jim Morton was lying prostrate on his back, his arms spread out, his hands clenched, his bleared eyes looking up blankly at the sky, the foam upon his speechless lips ; great drops of sweat stood on his brow, his face was purple and swollen. Ralph, with a gasping, choking sound, huddled up beside his father and tried to lift him up.

When Bell appeared, the hubbub subsided. The men recoiled. They had rigorously schooled themselves before her. Her simple affection had appealed to something higher than their sensibility ; an uneasy silence fell upon the group ; except for the panting of their long-drawn breaths, there was not a sound ; they quietly sheathed their knives.

The girl looked from one to another interrogatively.

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"What have you done? Boys, what is the matter?"

Her eyes were shining in the moonlight; her hair had unloosened in her run, and fell about her face and shoulders. The fear in her childlike face subdued their savagery. When they saw her heaving bosom and her outstretched, rounded arms, they felt guilty—savage and brutal.

"We chased him—for a lark—and he fell down in a fit." There was a crack in the big spokesman's voice. He uncovered his head, when Bell faced him.

"You call it a lark to frighten old men? Boys, I thought you brave; that you would not hurt a butterfly."

But Arthur Searell and Jim Morton were no butterflies. A lean-faced, wrinkled man said impatiently, "They've been cheating, both of them!"

He did not add that their ways had been darker than those of the heathen Chinese. The men had dissembled often about Bell's father, and their restraint now gave her the impression that it was an accidental advantage the offenders had taken of them. The code of honour was not high at Miners' Alley, but the unwritten law that presided over poker was not flexible enough to yield to the demands of Arthur Searell and Jim Morton. The others had resisted the temptation of actual chasement of Bell's father, because of Bell.

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A consciousness of safety beside his daughter had emboldened him to approach and to regain the power of assuming partially his old attitude of dignity ; but his voice still shook while he said :

“ You charge me with what is false.”

But, beyond muttered epithets, the men took no notice of his statements, for the doctor, who had joined the camp that morning, had been busy about the prostrate body. His investigation ended, he said with curt brusqueness :

“ He is dead.”

Then he became aware of Bell's presence, and his expression softened at the sight of her ; the severity in his voice died out. “ You should not be here,” he said.

But she took no notice, and kneeling beside Ralph in the dust, softly stroked his shabby coat-sleeve. The men who had been hooting were now dumb, looking at the crouching boy and the kneeling girl.

“ Ralph !” she said gently. The expression of her eyes and mouth, her bearing and attitude, condemned them.

Ralph turned his white, heavy face to her, and said in a dull, passionless tone :

“ He's dead.”

It was all over. Jim Morton would need the supervision of his son no more ; the refining process, if it was ever to begin at all, would not be

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Ralph's work. The boy stared down at the distorted face in stupid fascination, his lips tightly compressed, his hand gripping his father's as though to hold him back from legal retribution. Then he turned his big, dark eyes, pitiful with appeal, upon Bell, as though he questioned her as he could question no other; then gazed slowly and helplessly from face to face.

There was no sign of help—only of compassion.

"Dead!" he said again.

Arthur Searell crawled forward to look, then shrank away with a gesture of aversion. The doctor upraised the shuddering youth, and, covering the dead face, made signs to the men. They lifted their burden and began slowly to descend the path they had come, Arthur Searell following, muttering incoherent complainings—dark shadows of fear and anger flitting across his face.

The night passed slowly to Bell. Sitting among the bracken above the hut, she watched the white moonlight melt into the white dawn. The camp had not been asleep all night, but the lighted huts had given forth no sound—a hush seemed to have followed its noisy lawlessness. The full moon had made radiant beauty of the quiet hours, and the long tracks of silver on the water brought to Bell's memory that other river, and the high cliffs up which Walter had carried her so long ago to peep into heaven. She tried to see into the future, but

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could only stare blankly before her with wide open eyes.

This unexpected encounter with brutality and death had checked the sentiment of pleasure awakened in her heart ; the expression of serenity had faded from her eyes. Her experiences of camp life had been a series of alternate attraction and repulsion, and, as human nature should become accomplished in her, repulsion would predominate. Hitherto the coarser fibre of the men had not been distinguishable to her ; but she was reaching that period when esteem would be inseparable from her valuation.

All night she grieved for Ralph ; she wanted to comfort him, but he was shut up, she supposed, with his dead. While the landscape changed from light to light in mysterious splendour, and she caught glimpses of things half revealed in soft mist, she chanted an old Maori *Tangi* or lament she had learned from the natives in the North.

“ Light of the stars that floats here from the sky, .
Is that the spirit of Pehi passing by ?
Pehi, my mother, return to earth and me,
Who here alone am desolate for thee.
Ah, only let me see thy face again,
As consolation for my sorrow's pain.”

She crooned it in Maori ; the soft vowel sounds seemed to soothe her, for Bell did not cry ; but there was a strained, anxious look in her eyes, as

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of a puzzled child who had been startled. Her crooning ceased, and when through the mist a little daffodil path was opening in the east, she lay with her head resting upon the bracken, fast asleep. It was not till the little white butterflies, some hours later, flitted among her tangled hair and, with gay audacity, settled on her rose-like cheek, that she awakened.

She sat up with that vague suggestion of something wrong, which accompanies an awakening to trouble. The beginning and middle and end of yesterday passed in review with repetitions, until by degrees thought resumed its sway ; then she exclaimed :

“ Ralph ! ” in a tone of pitying modulation.

But Ralph did not appear all day. He was lying under a mountain peak, bearing his trouble in stoical, if sullen, silence, a purgatory of apprehension rending him, lest Jim Morton might be conscious of the fact that all was over and done with him for ever. The son knew that the father's soul had always been athirst for fun, and Ralph's ignorance of the higher life forbade absolute certainty of whether or not Jim would find congenial companionship where he was ; he could not lay hold on any ideal that would suit his father's case ; and, in his poverty of spiritual knowledge and imagination, he suffered till thought and feeling were exhausted ; then he lay still, his face pressed

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against the warm earth, leaving God to speak to him in his own way ; and memory linked itself to memory—like companions in misfortune,—of generous acts and kind deeds numberless which, to his comfort, took the place of honesty and duty. “ God'll keep an eye to 'im,” he muttered, when, haggard and weary, he rose from the ground, and, in the cool twilight, shambled down the hill.

He had almost reached his father's shanty, when the cold cheerlessness of the dreaded entrance and the vacancy and dulness of his mind gave promise of brightening, for a short distance before him he saw Bell. She was going to seek him, he knew ; perhaps she had already been to the shanty, for a light shone from the window and under the cracks of the door. Ralph's step quickened involuntarily, but Bell did not hear him approach : she lifted the latch and stood in the doorway.

CHAPTER IX

A GHASTLY GAME

WHAT the girl saw rooted her with horror to the spot. The rough shanty was lighted by two candles, one stuck in a bottle on the mantel-piece, flaring and guttering in the draught from the door ; the other, in a tin candlestick, stood on a deal table, round which sat three men playing cards. One was a short, thick-set, bullet-headed ruffian, with a shock of red hair about his face. His prominent teeth and eyes, and unhealthy looking face pitted with small-pox, added to the repulsiveness of his appearance. His scarlet shirt was dull with dirt ; his broad, stumpy hands disgusting in every sense, and covered with long red hair. Sitting opposite was the little old man who on the road the previous night had accused Arthur Searell and Jim Morton of dishonesty. He was looking at something in a half-fascinated, half-frightened way. The third man was Arthur Searell,—not the bland, semi-dignified Arthur Searell, Bell knew best, but a man horrible and repulsive ; unwashed, unkempt, his glittering bloodshot eyes staring out

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above his ragged beard, and on his grinning lips an expression of recklessness and mockery. Unmistakably, the three men had been drinking; a foul odour of spirits and tobacco filled the shanty.

The girl's entrance had been so quiet, that they did not hear it; she had come with her lips trembling with gentle comfort for Ralph, associating him all day with that half-consciousness of sacredness which the young connect with death, and she stood now, transfixed with horror and indignation, gazing where the three gamblers glanced with ugly leers.

Propped up against the wall was the coffin of Jim Morton, his body bulging forward—cards thrust between his stiffened fingers. The men were drinking to, and playing euchre with, their dead comrade. In this ghastly game Arthur Searell was dealing for the corpse, his long, nervous hands fingering the cards clumsily, his chest heaving with quick, spasmodic breaths; while half disdainfully, half fearfully, he glanced at his late mate, as though apprehensive that the closed eyes would open with indignation at the unprovoked assault.

It would have been unnatural for Jim Morton to receive reverence. His sense of humour would have been tickled at the idea, but his character, imperfect as it had been, had yet been capable of gratitude. He had piloted Arthur Searell un-

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scathed through more than one troublous scene ; and, in this weak imitation of others in their brutality, Arthur Searell fancied the dead man observant of his abandonment ; the quiet face seemed calmly to despise the mockery of the grey-headed old man.

The noisy and insolent laughter of the red-haired bully was suddenly arrested, and, before any one could realise what had happened, there was a sense of shock, and Ralph had clutched him with a clutch like that of a furious madman, and hurled him outside the shanty. With fierce invective, obeying a second impulse, he struck the leering, thin-faced man a blow that almost stunned him. The cadaverous jaws of the pale man were bleeding, his small black eyes glittered, but he only muttered beneath his breath while he staggered to the door. The bully was solacing himself with oaths ; he did not hesitate to affirm his sentiments toward his youthful adversary with all the force of his vocabulary ; but he employed words only in his resistance. The boy had right on his side, and his fury sobered and shamed them both ; his indignant wrath, his defiance of their greater strength, won their respect.

As Ralph turned to Arthur Searell, the man shrank back. The veins in the youth's hands and temples were knotted with rage, his nostrils were dilated and quivering, his big eyes flashed, his lips

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were drawn back tightly over his teeth. It was the face of a wild hunted animal before it springs ; every nerve in his body quivered to avenge the insult to his father. Bell, swift as lightning, stood between, a look of terror in her white face, and of mute beseeching in her eyes. Not a word was spoken. They gazed for a moment into each other's faces. Ralph dropped his upraised arm. The tempest of his passion was stilled ; he offered no resistance to the plea he read in Bell's eyes. He gave himself to her in that moment wholly ; for every nerve was tingling, every muscle quivering for vengeful action. With a look full of suffering, and panting hard with the suppression of violent emotion, he stood aside to let Bell's father pass.

Bell's brows drew together in a momentary look of hatred, while her eyes followed him to the door. For the first time she had seen him unmasked. As the man's glance took in her scornful expression, he felt cowed ; he understood that all future attempts to beguile her to remain where liberty meant licence, would be vain.

Ralph covered his dead from sight, and stood shamed beside it. He had come from the atmosphere of the mountains with a sense of exaltation ; but the vulgar desecration had thrown back on him his finer feelings ; pulled him down and belittled him in the eyes of Bell. His rage had been

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terrible to see in its silent ferocity, but to witness his shame was worse ; it was so absolute and hopeless. He stood with his back toward the girl, with bent head, the protesting pulse throbbing visibly in his neck. He wished that he and his father had both been buried out of sight, rather than that this proud girl had witnessed their degradation.

While he stood unable to conceive any softening of the moment, she softened it for him. With gentle grace she laid a handful of flowers at Jim's erring feet, then noiselessly removed all traces of disorder from the hut. When Ralph, at last, raised his eyes, the place seemed sanctified. Bell had consecrated it ; she had connected his thought again with purity and immortality ; for she was the only definition of divinity that had been manifested to him and that he comprehended.

Bell was crying quietly. She looked pale and agitated. She came up to Ralph and laid a caressing hand on his, looking up to him humbly, in a half-frightened way.

" Will you forgive us ?" she asked, with a piti-
ful tremor in her voice.

Her abasement recalled his manliness. His eyes rested upon her with dumb gratitude ; she had touched the best and truest of which he was conscious—his protective instinct ; nothing she could demand was too hard for him. His swollen muscles and strained nerves relaxed, the touch of her

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soft hands soothed and calmed him, the tightness at his heart was relieved and his breath came more easily.

"I'll get you out of this," he said.

"I shall write home to-night," Bell responded, with a strong determination in her voice.

A few moments later, she was struggling up the hilly road, like one physically weak and giddy. Bell was not an independent, self-sufficing soul, and she had clung to an ideal of her father that had failed her. This ideal had been a force in her young life, and she missed its support ; her imagination and affection alike made it imperative that she should have an outward object to hold on to—and Arthur Searell had offended her esthetic sense, and, for the moment, had become repugnant to her. A new love would arise later from the ruins of the old ; a love not limited by approbation.

Our first loves demand a reason for our loving ; later we ascend beyond what pleases us, and we bestow. Bestow, demanding no satisfaction for the bestowal ; our love becomes a living truth, permeating our consciousness ; a force superior to the outward causes which sense gives why love should appear and disappear.

In her new experience of loss she found one solace : the thought of home. Tears rained down her cheeks as she went on wearily. She had never been afraid before, but to-night she felt the fear

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that loneliness engenders, the loneliness that comes with disappointment at our severance from our beliefs.

The mountains towering above her in the dim light, for the first time, looked austere and unfriendly, she heard the minor chords in the musical voices of the night ; the mor-poke calling from the forest seemed asking such companionship as she craved.

When she reached the spot on the road where, the night before, she had met Guy, she stopped, arrested, as one often is arrested, by a sudden pleasant memory. His boyish eagerness communicated itself again to her in a little electric thrill. How glad and gay he had seemed ! She wished now she had not refused to send a message home. She fancied she could feel the pressure of the strong fingers while he had detained her hand, as though to dissuade her from her decision.

She reached her father's hut and opened the door. The living room was nearly dark ; but, from an inner apartment, she heard his measured breathing. She sat before the open window and gazed at the lighted camp. Then, lowering the blind to shut out the sight, lighted a small lamp, and drawing writing materials toward her, wrote the letter, so long delayed.

CHAPTER X

A NARROW ENVIRONMENT

THE years had wrought little outward change in Pareora. Public opinion and turbulent days seemed to touch it not at all ; yet in the tiny hamlet embedded between cliff and river, human life, with its thought and action, played its part. Even there were things to teach, to discover, and to do. The new generation, with its passion for knowledge, asked questions and found answers which puzzled and surprised the sires.

It was mid-day, late autumn, and along the solitary, uneven road from the schoolhouse to Dr. Strong's, Walter walked on his crutch, as he had walked scores of times between the tangle of rock and bush, first as a pupil of the school, and now as its master. He limped a little, but, in spite of his deformity, the young man possessed a dignity of appearance that forbade pity. A stranger's glance, attracted by the crutch, would be arrested by the grave spirituality of the cripple's face. The clear, deep, shining grey eyes, the fresh flesh-tints of the serious face gave evidence of health. There

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was something about Walter that impressed with the conviction that his was no wasted life spent in morbid inaction and self-pity. Even the limping walk could not disguise the energy of temperament that showed more in expression of face and suggestion of movement, than in movement itself. That, of course, had been restricted. His frame was built for action, but "the small things" he had done "sitting down" had been done with such unflagging zeal, that the active mind had stamped its impress upon the body.

Although his pace at the moment was slow, the occasional quick movement of his head when he heard a sound, the heart-felt way in which he greeted a wayfarer, showed that he was alive to all that passed ; and yet beneath this interest in every incident in a day which was one of many days of monotonous uniformity, there was a suggestion in his eyes of an inner existence, a concentration and intensity of feeling untouched by outward things.

Strolling along through the mists of the quiet country lane, while he looked in touch with the surrounding repose, he yet looked as though a fuller development, a larger environment might fit him for great things ; that, in the tumult where many flagged, he could be strenuous. As Arthur Sear-ell's successor in the school his scope was narrow, but Pareora had tasted the young master's quality both in the schoolhouse and out of it ; his cham-

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pionship, his watchfulness, his eagerness and sympathy, his religious fervour, gave stimulus to the feeblest in that small world on the bank of the Wanganui.

He was going home now, to the Doctor's house. The day was Saturday. He had no duties at the school that day, except those which were self-imposed. The morning had been partly occupied in helping a dull boy to keep pace with his class. Buried in his thoughts, he did not hear overtaking footsteps.

"Dawdling?" the Doctor called out in mock tones of admonition, at the same time looking into the face on a level with his own, with a glance which he meant to be indifferent, but which diagnosed Walter's mental and physical condition instantly.

"Brooding over his sister!" thought the man.

Walter did not often brood; never when there was a practical side to a sorrow—especially the sorrows of those around him. His daily contact with a practical man, a fuller knowledge of cause and effect had corrected that boyish tendency, and put weapons in his hands with which to overcome. The Doctor was in great measure pleased with his experiment; the science of his fathering had gone somewhat off the lines of his theory; the lad's strong spiritual sense had overmastered the scientific; but Walter had done for the man that one

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thing he had desired—he had cared for him—and he forgave his preference for healing souls to doctoring bodies. The ambitious future planned by the man for the youth had been relinquished bit by bit ; for, although Walter was strong to will and to achieve, he had no desire for any life, however large, outside Pareora. There, where his father had pulled down, he desired to build ; and, though he took an interest in the great affairs of the far-off world, listening to its voice lovingly and eagerly,—yet it was in Pareora, that he loved most rarely, that he worked and hoped his best. It seemed to the Doctor sometimes that the boy had a passionate purpose in his adherence to the place—to live another atmosphere into the sphere of his father's name.

How much life he discovered was a marvel to the man. Hemmed in on all sides as the boy was, his horizon appeared wide ; he did not seem to feel the press of solitude.

They had found their waiting hard. Walter, by an unexplained law, was as certain that his sister lived, as she was of his existence ; but the Doctor, to whom seeing was believing, blamed himself for having allowed the certainty to slip from his knowledge by the imposition of a trick. He, at all times, liked better to be taking an active part in the comedy or drama of life, than passively to await developments. Each gave his small rôle in

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life important treatment, not looking to be great ; but, forced by individual honesty and activity, each put into their common lines uncommon force. Both had the venturesomeness of enthusiasm, and, albeit their beliefs and methods were dissimilar, they started from the same point : the well-being of their neighbours. If they did not look far afield, like some reformers the world heard more of, those " of their own country " were no losers, and equally, unlike some prophets, the nearer home, the greater was their honour. The creation of a new world through the redemption of the body was the Doctor's creed ; the revolutionising of life by the salvation of the soul was Walter's. The labours of the man were analytical and dry in detail ; those of the boy meditative and imaginative. Both brought warmth and strength to their task, and the bond of earnestness that had at first attracted them to one another held them still.

The Doctor had grown a little stouter, a few grey hairs were visible on his temples ; but, with that exception, he appeared unchanged.

" I believe I was dawdling," answered Walter. " I hardly know whether I was dreaming, or waking."

" Been at the schoolhouse all the morning ?"

" Most of the time—trying to illuminate a very dark mind."

" No good," said the Doctor curtly. " It's time

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wasted, trying to make anything intelligent out of Bill Farmer ; he'll never know the pole from the equator. There are big spaces between his recollections, and an absence of enquiry absolutely fatal to the retention and pursuit of knowledge. He is burdened and crushed by the hereditary impedimenta of dulness."

"Bother your hereditary impedimenta !" exclaimed Walter hotly, flushing while he spoke ; "I don't believe in such evil destiny's ruling the life of man. I encounter that hopeless theory of yours even among the natives."

"And combat it ?"

The Doctor's eyes twinkled.

"Combat it ?" echoed the young man with warmth, "I should think I do ; man, in his relationship to God, inherits the capacity for perfection ; he starts from a spiritual standpoint, and, with his whole thought and energy directed towards the goal of his high calling, there is no reality in this obstruction in his path."

"None ?"

"Well, grant science all it claims, man still inherits God as well as Devil. And you would render his spiritual force utterly worthless by inculcating the belief that flesh only is real. '*The slothful man saith there is a lion in the path*' ; and this lion of heredity is a far-fetched excuse for spiritual laziness."

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The Doctor chuckled. The boy's enthusiasms had brought a touch of vivid colour to the sombre-grey of his existence.

Time ticked off the hours for him in a methodical, prosaic kind of way : there were no supreme moments holding the concentrated passion of years ; no discordant warnings, or silver chiming of bells ; just the steady swinging of the pendulum. The morning of his life had passed, the noon ; and the hands pointed now to early afternoon. Life would go on so, for him, he expected, till midnight.

" We come," said Walter, with all the assurance of young faith, " to a tainted body to be educated and purified ; not to learn that there is no possibility of redemption. Mine is the only hope for the unfortunate and the unhappy ; and hope is the refreshment and renewal of the world."

His voice trembled with emotion. The Doctor knew whither his thoughts were once more tending, what his hope individually was, and where. He drew into himself again and was silent. Another step or two brought them to the door.

" There is no bottom to that well of your faith," said the Doctor, as they sat down in the old dining-room.

" When I feel sick for Bell, as I feel to-day, I should get on badly without it. How long must we wait, I wonder ; what shall we hear when we

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do hear? She is not dead, I know. This morning," proceeded Walter, "I went down to the cottage——"

"And found it haunted," grunted the Doctor.

"I surrendered myself to the ghosts willingly," responded the young man, "while I tied up the creepers round the veranda posts. She is so fond of honeysuckle. Hallo! here's a letter for me—a lady's handwriting. Doctor!"

He shouted the last word. The Doctor looked up and started to his feet. Walter had turned white, and stared at the open letter in his hand. Without ceremony the Doctor snatched the missive, and caught sight of the first words—"Dear Brother—dear Walter." Then he flopped down into a chair, and, with a whistle that included every note of exclamation under the sun, ran his fingers through his hair, till it stood on end.

He tapped the floor impatiently with his foot. At last he roared out: "Here, read it, man, read it! Confound the boy, I declare if he isn't saying his prayers!" For Walter sat perfectly still with a wrapt expression on his face.

The Doctor could wait no longer; he glanced at the letter himself. "Dear Brother—dear Walter," he read again in a voice like a bull.

Walter stretched out his hands. The Doctor placed the letter in them. "Dear Brother—dear Walter," murmured the boy in low tones, and he

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bent caressingly with shining face over the sheets of closely written paper.

"Well, in the name of all that's idiotic, can't you go on? That's the third time we've had that."

"I'm alive and well," went on Walter, with trembling lips. He lifted his glad face and stared into the eyes he had learned to seek upon every occasion. They were blinking. "Alive and well!" repeated Walter in rapture. "Alive and well!"

"By the Lord Harry!" grumbled the Doctor, "that's the third time we've had that also. Now he's at his praying again! Here, hold the thing steady——"

"Dear old fellow, she's alive and well!"

The Doctor gave a grunt and walked to the window. "I never knew a dead girl write a letter. I never came across a case in my practice." And then he thrust his hands into his pockets and whistled, "It's better to live with the devil you know, than die with the devil you don't know."

He waited till the murmuring behind him had ceased; then turned round. Walter was sitting at the table, the sheets spread out before him, his chin resting between his hands as he used to sit when a little lad. The Doctor advanced to the table and drew up a chair.

"I wonder whether you long to see me as I do to see you, and the dear, dear Doctor. You will wonder, if I love you, how I could have gone—and

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why I stayed away so long, and why, more than all, I was silent——' ”

“ From where is the letter dated ? ” broke in the Doctor.

Neither had thought to look. Walter did so now, and glanced across the table with surprise.

“ Otago.”

“ The South Island ! Never ! ”

“ Yes—and three months old.”

“ Well, go on.”

“ ‘ But my silence, with many other things, I will explain to you when we return, and you will learn to pity our father as I have learned——’ ”

Walter's voice faltered, and he read on silently. The words of his sister were more than written words to him ; he heard her voice itself, as he had been used to hear it in familiar tones of pleading. A rush of emotion welled up within him, and, under the restraint he put upon himself, the Doctor, watching with eager scrutiny, could see his great excitement, and he curbed his own impatience, trying to be content with signs, till Walter, after alternate flushing and paling, found his voice again.

“ ‘ I have a friend here called Ralph—about your age. He is uneducated and rough, and morose to every one but me ; to me he is brother and friend. It is most likely he will go with us when we go,

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and see me safe home, for he watches over me as you would watch. Last night Ralph's father died in a drunken fit.' "

Then followed the scene in the shanty, curtailed, modified, the names of the men omitted ; but horrible still.

The Doctor rose in agitation.

" My God ! " he exclaimed, " what scenes for a woman child ! A man who could launch his daughter on such a sea of vice must be lost to all sense of right, or mad. Let us go for her. To-morrow. Not a day shall be lost. Finish the letter, lad."

They read on together, now and then breaking into stifled exclamations of pain, or of relief, for, while they read, the winsome, frank Bell lived again. They saw her—pictured unconsciously by herself—in her sunlit and moonlit rambles, fearless, vigorous and gracious. Scene after scene unfolded itself before them, idealized by her purity. They saw her neither heavy-eyed nor miserable ; unconscious of the pathos of the figure which rose strong and tender 'mid the scenes.

" ' I have been very happy all my life, till to-night. Daddy has been kind. I am very strong ; nothing ever ails me—except the recollection that I am ignorant of the ways of other girls. I can walk twenty miles a day over mountains, sing the songs the miners sing, and whistle back to the

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birds ; but I know the ways of mountains and streams better than the ways of girls.' "

" She's none the worse for that," put in the Doctor softly. " In spite of miners' camps and Arthur Searell, Bell is still Bell—blind and deaf to evil. She has neither ridicule nor contempt for ignorance or vice. That shameful and violent scene in the shanty has shocked and dismayed, but nothing makes her afraid ; she has a thoroughbred air about her."

The Doctor walked to the window and looked out again. Walter was smiling and still reading.

" I like that fellow Ralph," he said, looking up with a glow of eagerness ; " he is evidently genuine all through."

" He is the son of a criminal," grunted the Doctor significantly ; " and Bell and he seem tremendously fond of one another."

Walter suddenly flushed to the roots of his hair, but not at the insinuation of the elder man.

" Why !" he exclaimed, " they are on the way home. Bell says so in a P.S., see."

The Doctor read :—

" April 1st. I am posting this myself from Dunedin ; we are *en route* for Wanganui. Allowing for delays, we should be with you by the end of the month."

They were due ! It was then the first of May. The Doctor threw his unlighted cigar into the

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grate, and, making a grab at the coal-scuttle, piled coal upon the fire, as though he expected the wanderers to return at any moment. .

“ It is hideous to think of that cottage !” he exclaimed, meaning its want of repair ; and, forgetful of lunch, he betook himself to the local paper-hanger and general decorator, and, Sunday though the next day was, insisted upon an immediate start of restoration. Not only so, but he himself assisted. He was actually up to the elbows in paint and whitewash all the Sabbath day, and for several days afterwards, dismissing his patients with curt advice and hastily scribbled prescriptions.

Meanwhile Walter watched when he was not teaching. He had been holding himself to patience all this long time, schooling himself to do without Bell, and now he felt he could not banish the thought of her for a moment. “ Would they come by the river or by the road ?” he wondered ; and he walked himself weary between the points of watching, when he was not actually in the school. While there, he forced himself to attentiveness ; but the boys would see his eyes suddenly brim and his lips quiver, while the murmur of their voices were about him ; and they knew, although accustomed to his intensity and fervour, that “ Schoolmaster” for once was occupied with something apart from them. His encouragements and admonitions lacked their usual force. At

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night, when he need no longer struggle to repress himself, he yielded to the invading expectation, and prayed to be strong to bear, as Bell had borne, to be enabled to trample down indignation against his father, and show only pity and forbearance. He knew he had waited for to-day every day of the seven years—to be on the spot when they should return. He felt that, in the pursuit of whatever gift the world had to bestow, no other hour could have been so full and fruitful to him. He should have gained, it seemed to him, the best there was, when he had won his father's soul. The deepest discouragement should not dismay him. The man should know how dear he was to the son by whom he had seemed forsaken.

Bell had given her brother to understand that their father had deliberately isolated himself because of his son's dislike, and the sensitive spirit grieved that it should have been so. Walter asked himself anxiously whether he had cherished resentment against the man who had maimed him? He recalled vividly all his past terror and repulsion; a sense of the same old repulsion came with the memory—but resentment and hatred, no. It was all past and done with now, and, whatever his life might have been but for that night, at least he was certain upon one point—consciously he would not be a reproach to the sinner. Already the sin had established a sufficient barrier between them.

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"I must break it down," he said, while he watched the river ; "trample upon it, and crush it. I must struggle from my reserve. He has known what sadness and disappointment are, and, if I cannot give him esteem, I can, at least, hide my contempt."

It seemed to the lad that his life would be a failure, if he could not remove his father's doubt of his forgiveness.

CHAPTER XI

AFTER LONG DISAPPOINTMENT

BUT Arthur Searell had had no yearnings towards his son. His mind was intoxicated by a greater excitement—he had struck gold. His luck had come to him in his darkest hour—while Bell determined that he should not wait for it, and he wheedled and schemed to remain. With opened eyes his daughter had stood before him and insisted upon going home—insisted with a quiet and sustained determination that reminded him of her mother.

The southern autumn had broken up unseasonably into wild storms of wind and rain. No one left for the township over the mountains, and week after week passed without Bell's having an opportunity to post her letter. Ralph would have made the occasion, but he dreaded leaving the girl, lest some unexpected evil might befall her. He constituted himself her providence, and gave all protection that he had to give. Nothing would have persuaded him that she would be safe with him away.

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Since Jim Morton had been carried to his last—and first—resting-place, the youth had not mentioned his father's name. The miners thought he had chosen a queer spot for the dead man's grave, but they made no comment. A wave of sympathy and contrition had passed over the camp after the outrage in the shanty ; they followed their one-time mate to the summit of the hill, and left him there—and Jim Morton had not liked solitude ! His son had chosen the spot his grief had consecrated. It was the holiest ground he knew, and he left his father there with dull comfort. He was away from the contaminations of the camp, in a region of purity. Watchful as he was for fresh insult, the men gave him no further occasion for offence ; they behaved with decorous gravity ; then went their way in shamefaced unconcern.

Bell came up then, and linked her arm in Ralph's.

" My people," she said, " will be your people. You are not alone ; I will be your sister."

But on one point Ralph's knowledge was very real ; he knew that could not be while he loved her exclusively. He could hear his heart beating while she talked of the home where he should not dwell, and with every effort he made for her to gain it.

Arthur Searell put off the time of their going from day to day—fearful lest Bell, by any chance,

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should leave without him, yet reluctant to return to captivity. His choice seemed to him between a cell or an empty wilderness. He worked desperately—redemption might yet come—and on the very last day it came. Gold! Gold at last! Gold, after the dreaming and waiting; after the working and sinning; after expectation and despair. Gold! He shouted like a maniac, and cried like a child. A rush of gratified desire raised his crushed spirit in an ecstasy which he mistook for gratitude, and he thanked God. The burden and humiliation of long failure was lifted from him; he straightened his back and looked his fellows in the face. He heard, for the first time, the applause of men—applause of fellow-sinners and fellow-seekers like himself; but it was sweet to him, as it is to all.

It thrilled him, as it thrills every numb inch of human flesh dying of defeat. The cheers and the shouts rang through the camp; the men who had hooted and jeered gave genuine congratulation—for, amid universal failure, individual success is an earnest of the lucky day for all. We honour most who win, and dazzle us with hope, and Arthur Searell, who had fallen below the mark of man's esteem, found himself raised upon a pinnacle. He forgot that he was unfit to be there. His conceit gathered strength to strength. Where he had grovelled he became overbearing; and Bell, who

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had never despised him for poverty of estate, was ashamed of his poverty of spirit. She had watched his frenzy of greed with fear, but she had only contempt for his desertion of those who had once been his friends ; and when, on their last night at Miners' Alley, he objected to the proposed company of Ralph on their homeward journey, Bell's eyes filled with tears, and her voice broke as she said :

"Daddy, don't ask me to turn my back upon old friends."

"I ask you to return home as my daughter should. What will your brother and Dr. Strong say to such company?"

"If they had lived in a miners' camp, and seen what I have seen, they might say Ralph was superior to many who called themselves gentlemen."

Her father looked at her with irritable discomposure.

"I don't know what to make of you lately," he replied ; "you were happy enough to be here with me until the last few weeks ; and now—now that I have gained what will place you in your rightful position, you seem almost anxious to forget you are my daughter."

Bell looked at him mournfully.

"That is true," she answered quietly. "Sometimes I have wished that I could. Only lately,"

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she added quickly, in half contrition for her impulsive words. "Only once or twice, dear."

She had angered him.

"You are growing hard,—like Walter," he answered querulously ; going over to the fire and sitting in his chair, he held out one hand to the blazing pine log and shaded his face with the other.

"For years I have worked through heat and cold, friendless and unmanned, and all with the hope of making you rich."

"Was it for me, Dad ?"

"You are ungrateful !"

"Am I ?" asked Bell, more as if questioning herself than answering him. She looked at the bent figure swaying backwards and forwards in the chair, and moved a little nearer to him.

"If you mean," she said gently, but quite distinctly, "that I am to forget, now that you have found gold, all those days when we had none, and Ralph and Ralph's father shared theirs with us—I am afraid I am ungrateful to you for becoming rich for my sake—for I can't forget. Those days will never be forgotten by me, Dad ; they are part of my life, and I couldn't cease to remember them, if I would ; they are bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh ; go where I will, be what I may, the past days will live in me."

Her father glanced at her furtively. She was looking into the fire, and away from him.

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"The tree gathers its sap from the ground in which it grows," she went on, "and I have been absorbing year by year—I wonder what? I can't know whether I am like other girls, because I don't know any other girls; but, if I am not, am I to be blamed for that? Sometimes lately, I have thought that, if I have grown amiss—so amiss that those accustomed to the ways of gentlewomen will be displeased with me—I might even blame you. I couldn't be sure that I should not, because you knew the world and what it demands of its women, and you never gave me the choice between pleasing it—and gold."

She stood tall and graceful in the firelight, her fair young face flushed, her truthful eyes uneasy.

The man looked at her and laughed harshly.

"I have given you the power of winning all there is to win, the key, child, to unlock all the secret doors of the world. Gold is the key. Ambition, youth, talent, courage, fit the locks once in a way—gold never fails. • It outlasts all things, triumphs over all hearts—outlives God.

"I *know*," he added fiercely, starting to his feet and facing the listening girl with flashing eyes—"I know! I have had youth, ambition, and love. Bah! Ambition is called impertinence in a poor man, talent meets with tardy recompense."

"And love?" she asked, with a catch in her breath.

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The man gave a stifled cry. He went back to his seat, and, as though chilled, spread out his hands to the blaze.

"There was your mother," he replied simply.

Bell felt her heart leap. His simplicity paid a tribute to her mother, for which she thanked him. Something within her relaxed towards him, he was her father again, whom she had loved. She knelt down beside him, and kissed him. It was her first caress since that night in the shanty.

"Love must reckon with death," he went on excitedly; "and in solitude life sickens and withers! No plodding work for you, my Isobel! No bondage, no unsatisfied desire, no friendless days! I have given you all things in one—gold. Love it, Bell, hug it to you; the streets of heaven are paved with it, there are golden gates to the New Jerusalem!"

The man's voice rose almost to a shriek, his laughter mingled with the wind that was howling in the gully. The flax beat together, Bell thought, like the clapping of hands. She drew nearer to the man, who put his arm about her.

"Listen," he went on; "we have lived in small and dingy huts—we will live in a mansion. Our clothes have been rough and coarse—they shall be of silk and broadcloth! You have been hemmed in between mountains—you shall see mighty centres of commerce—great thoroughfares, splendid

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parks. I have been crushed and trodden upon—I will crush and tread down !”

“ No, Daddy, no !” cried the girl, covering her eyes so that she could not see the ugliness of his face. “ We have not been in bondage ; we have had the wide forests and high mountains. No one has trodden upon us !”

“ You are obstinate,” he said sullenly, withdrawing his arm, the exaltation dying from his face. “ You are blind. Without power life is a struggling probation. Money is power.”

Bell did not answer. Her youth rose in revolt against this sordid philosophy.

“ Money is power,” repeated the man.

“ I more desire home,” she said.

“ Fool !” he responded, beginning again his restless walk. “ Rich ! rich !” he muttered. “ Independent—the blessed privilege and boon of wealth ! No law and obligation for me, save my own. I shall have the gratification of enriching my son—”

“ But not of buying his love.”

The interruption came from Bell. Arthur Searell stopped short in his walk, as though he had been struck. He went cowering back to the blaze and rocked himself to and fro again. With profound contrition Bell crept to him and twined her arm about his neck, and with soft eyes looked into his, while she said tremulously :

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"Daddy, I did not mean that. Walter will give you his love, apart from the gold. If you had gone back poor as you came, it would have made no difference. You are making a mistake in emphasising riches too much—I feel sure you are. There are noble and exquisite things money cannot buy—I have had practical experience of that, narrow as my experience is. There is that breathless sense of joy in life; I have felt that many times when we were poorest; the affinity to all things living—bird, and insect, and tree, that takes away all solitude. There is the reverence for goodness that I have seen exalt the roughest men; there is the fearlessness of death, that makes a hero! I am ignorant, I know," she continued with deepening diffidence and softness; "but my heart, and what I have seen, even in a diggers' camp, tells me that these are not things to be scornfully laid aside for the magnificence of purchased good—and they will last to comfort you even if you should lose your gold—"

"Lose my gold!" he exclaimed, catching only at the last words, and looking up quickly with a startled expression in his half-mad face.

"I would kill the man who took it." He felt for his revolver, and then stretched out his long, muscular arm. "I'm an old man, but I'm strong," he added hysterically, "and I would kill the man who touched it. It has taken me all my life to

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find," he went on, almost in tears ; " I have missed everything for lack of it for more than threescore years ; now when it is mine no one shall take it. I have the value of it here."

He touched the belt fastened to his body. " It was too heavy to carry," he proceeded regretfully. " I am sorry it was so heavy ; it was so beautiful, ruddy and gleaming like your hair in the sunshine, Bell—but more beautiful—much more beautiful !"

He looked exhausted and haggard, but would not go to bed. Bell's chance remark had alarmed him ; he slept with a trembling hand resting upon his revolver.

Bell sat beside him, soothing him in his fitful slumber, with her large eyes fixed upon the fire. She loosened her hair from its coils, and it fell like a gleaming cloak about her back. Her fingers played with the soft tresses absently. In how far was her father right, she questioned ; which was the more desirable—beauty or gold ? She would soon be able to put life to the test ; to-morrow she would start to meet what lay outside the camp. She went to the window and looked out. A black sheet of rain beat against the pane, but, in spite of the darkness, she could discern the dim outlines of a slouching figure which moved forward from the flax. A sharp irrepressible pang smote the girl. She felt, for the first time, the sorrow that Ralph felt. An impulse of pity moved her. She

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beckoned. A white face came close to the window.

"Ralph," she said, "go home, dear. I am quite safe ; you will be wet to the skin. Boy, do go."

He lifted his head with a half-sullen smile.

"It is the last watch," she heard him say in stifled tones. He appeared wholly indifferent to wind and rain, and vanished again into the flax.

The hours struck slowly from the small clock on the rough mantel-shelf, and still the old man slept, his hand still on his belt, his chin buried in his ragged beard. The ruddy light of the fire died gradually, and the ashes on the hearth crumbled into dust. No sound broke the stillness of the night, save the howling wind and beating rain, and the deep breathing of the man. Bell, wakeful and watchful, listened to the dying wind, and the roaring and rushing of the river that was now audible. Then, far off, she heard the faint crowing of a cock. She went again to the window. Over the eastern dome shone a broad silver streak, and above the stars were shining. She remembered that other dawn when, waking up and finding herself alone, she had looked out, and, seeing the stars, been comforted.

A few hours later the supreme moment had arrived. Bell had started for home. Her face

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was more awake and expectant than on that morning when she had left it.

Early as it was, the camp was astir to say farewell to the old man and his daughter ; and, as they passed through the valley and ascended the mountain path, they were followed by ringing cheers. Bell walked first, leading the way, her eyes bright, her head thrown back, stepping as lightly as a fawn. Ralph, all his worldly goods strapped in his knapsack on his back, followed jealously. Arthur Searell, with several of their more intimate acquaintances, who intended to escort them to the summit of the hill, brought up the rear.

Bell talked gaily while she walked, calling back to one and another over her shoulder. Arthur Searell, gesticulating and important, still watched his mates furtively, with the cunning and distrust of madness in his eyes. Ralph plodded on in silence, looking neither right nor left, his eyes fixed upon the path. Whether it led through a wilderness of rock or a desert, he did not heed ; he was determined to keep close beside Bell till she was safe home. After that he could choose his way.

The men had prepared a little speech, which had been carefully worked up, but, when the brow of the hill was reached, not one found voice to deliver it. One after another wrung the girl's hand

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almost in silence, or, with a muttered "Good luck ! God bless you !" turned hastily to retrace their way, conscious of a sense of loss and loneliness.

The three wayfarers turned and stopped before they descended the mountain on the other side.

The great valley and the river were blotted out with heavy mist, which rolled beneath them like a billowy sea, the craggy mountains rising sheer out of the waters. One by one the descending figures of the men dipped into it and were lost to sight—beyond deliverance it seemed to Bell. She had grown pale, and looked startled ; the weird, desolate obliteration of the camp had given her artistic sense a shock. She had pined for deliverance from it, and it had shut her out. She stood looking stupidly ; then followed Ralph's gaze to the highest peak, and then, clinging to her father's arm, turned to descend the hill, and to meet what awaited her on that side.

CHAPTER XII

HOMeward

THE journey homeward from the South to the North Island was done by easy stages, by coach, train, and steamboat. They came at night to the southern city of the hills, that spread like a valley of golden stars between the bay and the irregular mountains. Here they loitered for a few days, tracking the mountain burn to the waterfall on the cliffs, hunting points of interest in the staid old town ; then passed on over the vast and lonely Canterbury plains, bordered on their grey horizon by the purple and silver of the Southern Alps, from which rushed mighty snow rivers, thundering through speechless valleys triumphantly, in full, foam-crested flood ; giving voice and colour to the still, dim vastness. From the city of the plains, and its music of cathedral bells, they passed to the quiet of a night on the sea, awaking, this next day, to the turrets and spires of Wellington ; from there by rail through scenes of great magnificence as far as Napier ; and there, with Wanganui within easy access, they came to another halt.

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With every delay Arthur Searell became more animated. He had enticed Bell hither and thither with endless caprice. Here was an extinct volcano ; they must picnic on the grass within its crater ; there was a waterfall ; further off a great forest ; and Bell, interested in all she saw, and contented in the thought that, although slowly, they were journeying homeward, did not chafe at these delays, until they were close to Wanganui. There her father raised a dozen contradictory objections to proceeding in a direct course, suggesting that, instead, they should take steamer to Auckland. Bell would then have seen the extreme cities of both Islands, he said ; the snow fields and wild mountains of the South, and the volcanic geyser region of the North.

Her father's motive seemed disinterested and impersonal. He had been a delightful companion during these weeks of travelling, more like the companion of their earlier wanderings, and the exact opposite to what he had been of late—as though, with gratified desire, his returning manliness disputed evil passions and silenced them. Bell, enchanted, was incapable of analysis, and her heart went out to him in trust.

Ralph, throughout the whole journey, had shown signs of uneasiness and impatience, looking with sad eyes upon the changing panorama, like one waiting for the falling of the curtain ; but, al-

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though he knew that to hasten the end was to hasten his own privation, he spared no effort to hurry Arthur Searell on. But he was melancholy, and showed none of Bell's effusion and enthusiasm ; for, not only did the future mean renunciation, but Bell's present pleasure was apart from him. His suffering made him spiritless, for he could not manifest himself among pleasant and refined surroundings. Besides, his unreasoning doubt of Arthur Searell remained unalterable ; he knew the man's unfathomed craft, and suspected that, so long as he could, he would shun Wanganui.

Auckland lay under the golden haze of an Indian summer—gusty storm had been left behind on the south, and Bell, who found nothing intolerable in the sunshine, forgot her irritation at their deviation of route, and gave herself up to the present hour.

The stately city, with picturesque aloofness, drew a little back among sheltering hills from the shining lake-like bay, which spread out its arms to embrace it, wooing it ceaselessly with ripple and murmur, casting over it continually the magic glamour of light and shade, breathing upon it its sweet breath of salt and sea-weed, telling it tales of mist-enwreathed headland, forest-clad island, and of the force and power of the ocean that lay behind it.

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Bell, ever alert and blithe, explored suburb and town, following the streets to their dip into a fern gulf, climbing them to examine the structure and contents of the shops in the busy town.

Ralph followed her lead, his hat slouched over his eyes, his mouth set in dogged lines, scowling in jealous misery at the admiring glances cast after Bell, who, in her fresh bloom and grace, overflowing with eagerness, watched the passionate scenes of humanity with keen interest.

Her eyes would linger fondly and with something of her old childlike content upon that other figure so often beside her. The tall, stooping old man, with snowy hair and faultless linen, was so unlike the roughly-clad, wild-looking man she had known at Miners' Alley, that she could fancy sometimes that the latter had never lived. The man emerged from the brute, for the time being; he reawakened to the instincts of his youth; his age seemed to have found its true setting among social and artistic surroundings; and Bell thought of home serenely, where she was to study and fit herself in precious comradeship for what lay beyond. The eternal promise of hope came back to her eyes, her lips were parted with a smile, her colouring regained its former brilliancy, and Ralph watched her, half glad, half sad, that the present could triumph so completely over her past experience. She was her father's own daughter here;

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the optimism of her temperament had been the man's happiest gift to her ; she came up from deep waters of doubt and trouble, and wove new illusions. The system of negation applied to Ralph's life had starved optimism—he was not easily deceived.

Amid the crowd, Bell was often at a loss, and lonelier than among the mountains ; she knew their secrets and understood their moods, but she felt, with poignancy, how much her education lacked to put her in touch with that mixture of cynicism and earnestness which characterised the conversation of those about her ; she was out of touch with the superfluities of life, and her character was too strong and too simple to affect tastes she did not feel. All the journey she had particularly studied girls, observing their deportment, and listening to their talk ; but the charm of this pastime diminished when she found that her advances were not met with answering emotion. So she became shy and self-conscious in her intercourse with her own sex, fearful of criticism, oppressed by a breathless and painful excitement, that arose from her desire to be one of them. She drew back proudly at the first snub, sensible of some omission ; she had not learned yet that one of the arts of civilisation is to appear in well-dressed company ; and did not suspect that she was snubbed because of Ralph's rough coat. Un-

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conscious of the fact, she strolled contentedly beside him.

One of Bell's favourite walks was along the winding suburban road between camellia hedges and scoria walls that led to Mount Eden. The burnt-out volcano rose high and green above the surrounding villas, that, half hidden by tropical verdure, clustered in its vicinity—a monument of nature to the fact that daisies may grow where scorching fires have ceased to rage.

When Bell had made the toilsome ascent of the mountain, her gaze—after wandering over the lovely harbour to the hazy sea and at the bountiful country spreading far and wide—would sweep round and, glancing at the domes and spires of the city, seek the spot where the prison stands at the foot of the mountain, grey and sombre, as if comparing the restriction of its walls to the long reaches of the shore and the boundless immensity of blue horizon. Then she would blame herself for her old fear for her father, that now seemed foolish and almost criminal !

One day, when Ralph and she were descending the path, the steady tramp of feet ascended to their ears. Suddenly, round a curve, half a dozen prisoners came into sight, followed by officers in charge, with rifles.

When they had passed, Ralph looked up quickly, and saw that Bell had become quite pale. She

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had an unreasoning dread of captivity for any living thing ; the law seemed despotism and tyranny to her free youth, and her untrained sympathies were on the side of those whom it appeared to oppress. She did not speak until they came to the bottom of the hill ; when, passing the prison, she saw a woman leave its gates, walking with down-cast head and crying.

"She has been to visit some one in there," said Bell, with a quiver in her voice. "Some one she loves, evidently. I should like to go and comfort her, only I don't know what to say. Nothing one can say can make disgrace easier. I couldn't bear it ! oh, I know I couldn't."

Her bosom heaved, and she looked at the woman pityingly.

"You'd best not meddle for fear of hurting more. It's sometimes kinder not to seem to know ; most people like to be left alone when they're in trouble. Trouble's like dyin'—folks may set round an' hold your hand, but you've got to go through with it by yourself," said Ralph.

Bell brought her glance from the woman to Ralph's face. Signs of his stony despair were visible. Bell felt a tightening of her heart.

"You are brave," she answered gently. "I think—no, I am sure that I could not be brave, as you have been, under some burdens—" She meant his father's disgrace, and he knew it, al-

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though she hesitated to put it into words. "Most trouble is only for a time, like the disappearance of the sun ; but *there*"—she looked back over her shoulder at the gaol—"more than liberty is lost. Something goes from a life that can never re-enter it ; a man loses the prerogative of honesty—the trust of his fellow-men. That must be awful ! to feel that, no matter how bitter his repentance, never again will justice be dealt out to him ; that courage and even devoutness will be called cowardice and hypocrisy, a cringing for favour."

"If you hit often enough on one place," replied Ralph, "the flesh gets numbed and ceases to smart ; and, p'r'aps, some folk are like that ; they come to an end of feelin' !"

"That would be a great price to pay for anything," rejoined the girl ; "more than anything is worth—to lose the power of feeling. Shame even would be better."

Her lips trembled. Her little air of reserve dropped off her naturally. She involuntarily stretched out her hand to Ralph. He held it for a moment, pressed it and let it go. She came nearer to him in that moment of wistfulness and half-fright, than she had come since they had left the camp. He would never be able to recover the disposal of himself, whether she needed him or not ; but it restored confidence in himself, and soothed his bitterness when she did need him.

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And she needed him a good deal after the first week in Auckland. Arthur Searell's self-restraint relaxed. His goings and comings were uncertain. For no expressed reason he moved their quarters to a small hotel in a side street near the wharf, and spent a good deal of his time among the shipping ; his eyes became bloodshot once more, his flesh flabby, his speech incoherent ; a feverish haste betrayed the movements he intended to be secret, and, when he felt Ralph's eyes upon him, he looked aggrieved. He became negligent in his dress, and when Bell, with sad gentleness, sought to adjust this, he scolded her fretfully for her service.

At the end of another week, the two aliens wandered about the lighted wharves much as they had wandered at Miners' Alley, seeking Arthur Searell in rough bars.

"Leave me alone, leave me alone ; why do you watch and persecute me ?" he would say scowlingly to Ralph, when he caught sight of him ; but, with a curious submission to the stronger will, he allowed himself to be led away. For all that, after Ralph had taken him home, he would with dexterous cunning escape again. Sometimes, as he groped back to his room, he would pause for a moment outside Bell's door, and almost groan in an agony of terror lest, awakening, she should detect him, and force him into subjection.

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It was right that he should have his recompense, he told himself ; he had won the gold himself, and the days of his freedom were few and precious. It was all very unlike his dream of power ; what happened was prosaic and commonplace. The difference between his vision and the reality was, that he was governed instead of governing.

CHAPTER XIII

IN DELIRIUM

It was an evening at the end of June, and contrary to his custom, Arthur Searell sat indoors with Bell and Ralph.

Bell was sewing and talking to Ralph, but her glance constantly stole to the face among the white hair. It was pinched and grey to-night, and tremulous with some suppressed emotion. She crossed over to him, paused irresolutely ; then, laying her hand upon his arm, said in low trembling tones, as though coaxing a tired child :

“ You must come home ; you must, *you must*. ”

He started and stared at his daughter vacantly.

“ I have indulged you, and now you must give me my way. I won't wait for you any longer. I have been loyal, but now, if you do not come, I shall send for Walter. ”

He stared away from her through the window with eyes that saw without transmitting to his brain what they reflected ; but, presently, he glanced furtively at the clock upon the mantel-piece ; then rising, he laid down the book he had been ostensibly reading, and replied to Bell :

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"Yes—perhaps to-morrow!"

He roused himself and touched Bell's hair, seemed as if about to add something more, then said abruptly: "Good-night, I am going to bed."

In his own room he abandoned the deceptive rôle. His haggard face became tortured with despair.

"I am ruined," he moaned. "Ruined!" he reiterated. "Only a hundred pounds left of thousands. To-night is my last chance; my luck will change; I shall win."

The impression was so vivid that, in imagination, he handled gold; he ran his long greedy fingers through it, patted it down, heaped it into little piles, smiling at his illusion—an evil, sinister smile that made him ugly. Suddenly he seemed to awaken; he looked round half fearfully, with a defeated, dazed expression, passed his hand over his eyes, and, shaking as with the palsy, unlocked a drawer, and taking out his revolver, handled it nervously. But his courage ebbed, he put back the weapon hastily, and, on tip-toe, opened his door a little; then, putting his ear to the crevice, listened. All was silent in the house. He moved noiselessly down the dimly-lighted stairs—there was only one small lamp burning in the hall below—no one was about. He crept along more like a criminal than the free man he had boasted himself to be—his mind put a positive denial upon free-

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dom. He would have given a compassionate spectator the impression that he was hunted down ; and so he was, for Bell's pure eyes were watching him from every shadow. His hand shook so that he could scarcely turn the handle of the door. He had promised her so much, and to-night he was to stake his last possession. For a moment he hesitated ; but the faculty of the gambler was most alive in him ; it pushed its way through his weak remorse. In another moment he was outside.

There his eyes fell on Ralph, leaning against the portico, under the flickering lamp that hung overhead.

" You here !" he burst out with sudden anger. He felt that he was to be thwarted, the opportunity to retrieve his losses to be snatched from his grasp. Ralph's steady dogging of his footsteps seemed his greatest misfortune. His presence brought remembrances he would fain have cast off with his miner's garb.

" Yes, I'm here," answered Ralph sullenly, and after a glance into the angry face, looking steadily down the dimly-lighted, quiet street, " an' you're not pleased to see me, I know. There's no reason why you should be. I know too much to please you ; but you've got no call to fear me ; not if you'll do what I want you to."

Ralph had calculated rightly ; his veiled threat gained him attention. He removed his gaze from

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the street and looked straight into Arthur Searell's face. The man shrank perceptibly. Ralph's knowledge of more than one of his dark transactions took considerably from the charm of his new position. He would long ago have banished Ralph from his sight, but that he knew Bell would immediately get restive and call out for home.

"I seem to have incurred your displeasure," said Arthur Searell with cold irony. "The position is getting involved. I should like to understand it; your attitude is outside my classification; will you explain it?"

The tone and the words wounded the younger man. He stood upright, flushing angrily.

"You would, would you?" he exclaimed hotly. "You're a damned old scoundrel, if you ain't a madman—passin' yourself off for a gentleman. If you ain't fit to be in gaol, you are for the lunatic asylum—instead of draggin' Bell about all over the country. That's some of the position, I reckon; an' I've got reasons enough for thinkin' as I do, but I shan't give 'em to you. If you're set on bringing Bell to want an' disgrace, why there's them as shall hear my reasons an' 'll listen to 'em too!"

Arthur Searell made a forward movement to escape, but Ralph laid a detaining hand upon his arm. Their eyes met, and Arthur Searell stood still. Ralph's force had placed his will in check,

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although he did the best he could to exercise it. The sensation of coming defeat was disagreeable to him. But Ralph had no pity ; the sight of the grey-headed coward was a disgusting spectacle to him. If he could have left him to his fate, he would. His imitation of good breeding repelled Ralph. The curses of honest men were preferable.

"I've set my mind on you takin' the boat for Wanganui to-morrow," proceeded Ralph. "You're after no good, sneakin' out of the house like this. It isn't as if you was fit to take care of yourself. It ain't no use comin' your grand airs with me ; it's all play-actin'. You're up to mischief. Not that it matters much what comes to you. You'd be as good dead as alive, for all I see. If it wasn't for some others, I wouldn't stir an inch to save you from any sort of danger. You'll get yourself robbed, that's what'll happen. Hand over that money."

He advanced and held out his hand.

"No, no !" cried the old man excitedly, with a swift movement of his hand.

"None of that, you old fool !" said Ralph, contemptuously. "I ain't a-goin' to rob you, though, if every man had 'is due, some o' them notes belonged to my father. I'm only goin' to take care of them for you. Hand 'em over. It ain't no use kickin' up a shindy ; I mean to get a hold of them notes, if I have to knock you over the head for it."

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Ralph had raised his voice and stood in a menacing attitude. The door behind them opened, and the night porter looked out. Seeing people belonging to the house, he spoke mildly—"Gentlemen, no disturbance, please."

Ralph restrained himself. He could not serve Bell by getting up a scene with her father. It had come to his ears that the old man gambled large sums nightly, and he thought rightly that he carried money now ; but he did not guess it was the last. The street was a quiet one leading to the wharf, the flickering lamps among the shipping reminded Ralph.

"Mr. Searell," he said in conciliatory tones, "if I've been rough, I'm sorry for it. You're an old man an' I'm a young one. I lost my temper. I hadn't no right to say what I did."

"You have no right whatever to dictate or direct my movements," said Arthur Searell angrily.

"In an ordinary course I shouldn't 'ave," answered Ralph promptly ; "our lives lie apart ; but this isn't an ordinary course, you'll admit. We ain't lived ordinary lives at Miners' Alley ; some ain't died ordinary deaths ; Bell ain't had the ordinary lookin' after as most young ladies 'ave. It's for her sake, not my own, I make bold to speak. I know her heart's fixed on you, and fixed on you going back to her relations without disgrace an' sorrow ; an' when I see you hankerin'

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after chuckin' away your good luck—right, or not right, I feel bound to interfere. I should take blame to myself, if I didn't. Why don't you take Bell home? It'll save trouble in the end."

"Whatever I feel prompted to do will be done without making promises to you."

Arthur Searell was shaking with nervous excitement, but an expression came into his face and manner that warned Ralph that they were not alone. While he gained confidence, he yet looked displeased at some one over Ralph's shoulder. Ralph turned. Standing at his elbow was the man who had been known at Miners' Alley as "the Bully." Ralph had not seen him since the night in the shanty, and the sight of him now—with his gleaming teeth protruding from his grinning mouth, and his unhealthy face with its red hair—gave him a shock.

"You here?" he said, using the words Arthur Searell had used to him a few minutes before, and staring stupidly into the leering face.

The quiet street, with its rows of silent houses, vanished. He could see his father's cabin; the bare table; the three men seated round it, and the light of the flickering candles falling across that ghastly face in the coffin.

"Look as though you'd seen a ghost!" grinned the Bully. "Come and have a drink?"

"Damn your drink!" said Ralph in a low, sav-

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age mutter, his big dark eyes aflame with rage. He began to understand. Whether by accident or design, Arthur Searell had fallen in with this man again, and he would succeed eventually in despoiling him, by fair means or foul.

"Keep a civil tongue in your head, you cub!" responded the Bully, his face darkening.

"No quarrelling," said Arthur Searell, intervening, and, with perceptible nervousness, turning to Ralph and venturing to lay an admonishing hand upon his arm. His manner became quite paternal. There was an ominous gleam in Ralph's eyes that reminded him of certain other occasions.

"I haven't no intention of quarrellin'," responded Ralph, still in a low tone; and, turning his back on the Bully while he spoke, he tried to catch the shifty eyes of the elder man. "If you only promise me to come into the hotel and leave this fellow—"

"I can't promise you anything to-night; I have made an appointment. To-morrow we will talk about going home. You are making no end of a fuss about nothing; your behaviour to-night throughout has been senseless, childish—"

"Like a bloomin' cub!" interrupted the Bully.

Ralph's face twitched, but he kept his back resolutely turned.

"I'm not a child, nor yet an idiot. You presume; you forget yourself. My daughter's fool—"

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ish friendship for you has turned your head ; don't make any more mistakes like those you have made to-night. I am the controller of my own and my daughter's movements."

The tone of haughty disdain put an immeasurable distance between Ralph and Bell. Although he despised the hand that held the whip, he smarted under the lash. The man's snobbishness imposed upon his ignorance ; for a moment, his anxious fears, his shadowing of this man who stood before him with offended mien, seemed out of place and even an impertinence. He tried to recover himself, to shake off the illusion that Arthur Searell's manner had produced ; but, for the time, he had lost sight of the man he knew, treacherous and irresponsible, and saw only the dignified, well-born gentleman.

A mocking laugh restored his judgment. He turned swiftly, and struck the grinning Bully in the face. For a few seconds there was a dead silence. The Bully slowly licked his wounded lips, like a bull-dog after a blow ; then he stretched out his arms deliberately, as though to test their muscle, his eyes glaring, meanwhile, into the fierce eyes glaring back at him. Ralph was deadly pale, his drooping mouth set savagely, his black brows drawn together ; the muscles standing out on his closed fists, the throbbing of his neck testifying to the intensity of his passion.

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Arthur Searell trembled, and glanced hastily down the street in search of the police ; but the street was empty. The next moment he had forgotten his impulse to prevent the fight ; a sensuous pleasure in the animal struggle, a desire to see Ralph humiliated, prevailed.

"If that's your game, come on," said the Bully.

He gloried in his strength ; he was proud to exercise it. The combatants closed in a fierce, silent struggle, at times so closely locked as to render each other powerless. Presently the bulky form of the Bully swayed, and fell to the pavement with a sickening thud. He recovered himself in a moment, and sprang to his feet again. Ralph, panting and livid, leapt at him like a wild animal. The Bully's boasted strength was unequal to cope with Ralph's furious onslaught ; a second time he fell heavily. When he struggled to his feet again, he cast upon his vanquisher a look of malignant hate. He would never forgive Ralph for having beaten him in fair fight.

Arthur Searell, fearful of the consequences, had interposed, and was leading the Bully away.

With face and hands besmeared with blood, Ralph leaned against the portico. He had avenged the insult put upon his father.

"I'll kill him !" he muttered, looking after the retreating figure. Then he became aware that

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some one was leading him into the house, and saying :

“ You're a rough customer ; you'll get notice to quit this in the morning, when the boss hears of your goings-on. I'm surprised at you, I am, creating a disturbance in a respectable house. I've a jolly good mind to give you in charge.”

Ralph shook off the detaining arm, and stumbled his way upstairs. Feeling by the wall, he groped to his room and sat down on the bed. The window was open, and the cool air blew in from the harbour ; there was a gentle, lapping sound of waves. He sat with his hands on his knees, his head dropped forward on his chest, the blood clotted about a wound on his forehead. He felt stunned and stupid, as though all his life had gone from him in his awful rage. The lapping of the water reached his ears and partly roused him with thoughts of the river and Bell. God ! what had he done ? He, who had prided himself on his self-command, had been fighting, like a wild animal, one of the lowest brutes of Miners' Alley—he, who had constituted himself guardian of Bell's interests. He had allowed his sense of hurt and revenge to culminate in this—the evil in him to gain the mastery. A sharp agony contracted his heart when he thought how Bell had trusted him, and how he might have compromised her. He was not fit company for her ; he would go no further,

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but write to her brother and show him the whole position. Then he remembered that Arthur Sear-ell might even now be in danger. He attempted to rise, obeying the old impulse to follow and keep guard ; but his pale lips parted, his hands clenched, and he fell back senseless on the bed.

The town clock had struck two, when the porter, dozing in his office, was roused by footsteps. He looked up and saw Ralph go out. He had removed the blood-stains from his face, but his fury and its effects had left him ashen pale. All traces of violence had gone, his expression was all remorse.

"He's a miserable-looking owl !" thought the porter, and dozed off. A few moments later he was roused again by the swinging to of the door, and saw Arthur Searell go up the stairs. The old man went slowly, as though very tired, and he shivered, as with cold. Reaching his room, he lit the lamp. His face was drawn and livid, his eyes were wild. With a groan that sounded like a curse he sank upon the nearest chair, and all huddled up, his beard and hair dishevelled, fear and horror in his eyes, he looked scarcely human.

"Gone !" he ejaculated, as though the words were forced from him by a power independent of his will. "Lost ! all lost !"

His gaze was fixed upon a distant, dim corner of the room ; he seemed to be watching an enacted

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scene, his lips twitching spasmodically. "It was not fair play, Bully ; but I have paid up honourably. No one can say I did not pay honourably ! Every penny, every penny !" he muttered, seeking satisfaction in the words. "But I've been robbed ! robbed ! Ralph said I should be. Where's Ralph ?" he went on, looking round vacantly with eyes that gleamed. "Kill him ; kill him !" He bent forward, seeming to see the combatants before him, struggling a second time ; he chuckled and rubbed his shaking hands together in fiendish glee. Then his voice broke to a plaintive wail ! "My gold ! My beautiful gold—all lost. All lost !" he reiterated, burying his face in his burning hands, and swaying himself backwards and forwards, in his old habit of distress. "I'm a poor, broken-down, ruined old man !" "Eh ?" he ejaculated, straightening himself suddenly. "Eh ? what did you say ?" He addressed himself to a phantom of his own brain—the phantom looked like Ralph.

"Get it back !" the figure seemed to say.

"Yes, that's it !" exclaimed the delirious man, excitedly ; "get it back, of course ; get it back !"

He sprang to the door, then stopped, looking back piteously over his shoulder. "It is all my own, honestly my own," he cried, whimpering like a woman ; "I dug it out of the hard earth. Get it back—of course, get it back !"

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He went out to the landing softly. At Bell's door a fit of shuddering shook him ; his limbs trembled so that he could not go on. The thought of her stirred him through his madness, and triumphed over all other emotions. He rested his grey head against the door-post, and, for a moment, his wandering mind was fastened to one thought.

" My girl !" he said brokenly ; " my little Isabel !" Big burning tears fell on his hand and scalded it. He seemed almost to take a pitying interest in the fact that he wept. He lifted his hand and looked at the drops that had fallen on it, as a child will do, and wept the more because he saw them.

Presently he roused himself, and, with instinctive caution, made his way out. The porter had shaken off his dozing, and was attending to his duties in another part of the house. Some expected arrivals by a late steamer were occupying his attention.

No sooner had the door closed behind her father than Bell softly opened her own and looked out. She held a lighted candle in her hand, the rays of which fell over her white night robes and gleaming hair. Her sweet face looked pale and troubled. " I must have been dreaming !" she murmured ; " there is no one here. To-morrow I will beguile him away."

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She shut to the door and went back to bed, and was presently dreaming that she was again at Pareora romping with her brother with all her old reckless gaiety.

Meanwhile Arthur Searell was penetrating into the darkness of an alley near the wharf. He walked swiftly and mechanically, more like a man walking in his sleep than with his usual cautious movements when anxious to avoid detection. All the languor and exhaustion had vanished from his gait. He picked his way easily through a confusion of iron and timber, the *debris* of the wharf, and, crossing a dark, narrow yard, entered a low doorway, like one accustomed to the spot. Down a narrow passage he stumbled, and turning the handle of another door, entered a small room. Apparently he expected to find it occupied, for he looked surprised when he did not see the object of his search. Ah ! there he was, stretched out on a rough colonial sofa, evidently overtaken by a drunken sleep, for he was fully dressed, and a candle was burning on the table—upon which stood an empty whiskey bottle and two glasses.

Hitherto Arthur Searell's movements had lacked secrecy, he had followed an idea spontaneously—to get his money back. While he stood looking at the sleeping man, a change came over him ; fear crept into his face and cunning into his eyes. He seemed to become aware of the fact that the Bully

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would resist. The man's coarse mouth was open, and his gleaming teeth gave him the appearance of grinning derisively ; a foul pipe had fallen from his mouth and rested upon his beard. His red shirt, open at the throat, showed his powerful, hairy chest, and his sinewy arms were bare to the elbow. No moral suasion would avail here. He was, evidently, only for the time being off his guard.

An ague fit of trembling shook Arthur Searell's frame again ; he glanced round, half appealingly, half apprehensively, as though imploring aid from a sudden temptation, or in fear of unseen danger.

Black smoked rafters met his view ; there was no sound, except a guttural snore from the sleeping man. He gazed back, as if fascinated by the ugly face on the hard pillow ; then, with the stealth of a cat, he lifted a heavy, knobbed stick he had taken from the stand at the hotel, and, with a swift, fierce ferocity, struck the sleeping man two crashing blows over the temple.

A look of triumph illuminated his face, and a grating laugh escaped him. He raised the stick for a third blow, hesitated, then dropped it. It fell with a clanking sound upon the floor. Arthur Searell, with hasty fingers, took a pocketbook from the bulky form of the unconscious man.

" It's mine ! All mine !" he muttered, while his fingers closed upon the notes. He moved swiftly to the door ; then turned to look back. The can-

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dle, guttering in the socket, now flared up, then flickered down, alternately throwing into light and shadow the hideous face, down which a dark stream trickled. It seemed to Arthur Searell that the man mocked him. He turned and fled.

The dawn was breaking when Ralph re-entered the hotel. The walk in the cool night air had calmed him ; discontent had in great measure rolled away, and left his spirit lighter. He would not be a discord in what harmony was possible for Bell, he told himself, or spread an added shade of sadness over her sky.

He called the porter on his entrance.

"Do you know whether Mr. Searell is in his room?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, sir," answered the man civilly. Something in the haggard face and sad eyes of the youth touched him. "He came in hours ago—soon after you went out, in fact. Do you feel better now, sir? Can I do anything for you?"

Ralph responded that he felt all right, and was not in need of anything ; then went with his usual slow movements up the stairs.

While he was passing Arthur Searell's door, it softly opened. The man stood there in a loose dressing-gown. He drew Ralph into the room.

"How late you are !" he said in a whisper, suppressed excitement in his tones and manner. "I've been sitting up for you. I went to your room when I came in—hours ago. What time did

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you say the boat starts for Wanganui in the morning?"

"Ten o'clock!" answered Ralph, looking at the grey face eagerly and curiously. In the white morning light it looked remarkably old.

"We go by it!" replied the old man, trying to appear calm.

"No?" exclaimed Ralph, with joyous incredulity.

"Yes, we will, my boy. We'll all go home. Friendship is almost as thick as blood. There shall be no more quarrelling."

Was he drunk? Ralph thought. No; there was every sign of nervous collapse after a drunken bout—pale, loose flesh, bloodshot eyes, shaking hands; but he was sober enough.

"And, Ralph," he said hurriedly, "here's the pocketbook you asked for; take care of it for me. You'll get the tickets and see to all that, won't you, Ralph? I'm tired; I think I'll lie down and go to sleep."

"You do, old man," responded Ralph heartily. "Right you are! I'll cover you with this rug, and bring you some coffee before the boat starts."

A few hours later, Bell stood between her father and Ralph on the deck of the steamer, watching the fast receding shores.

"It will soon be a dream," she said, clinging closer to her father's arm. "It is all fading away like a memory; soon the only reality will be home."

CHAPTER XIV

THE RETURN OF THE WANDERERS

A "Sou-Wester" was doing its best to batter in the windows of Dr. Strong's study, beating a thick sheet of rain against them, and rattling them in their frames. A grand controversy was in the air ; the voices of Nature were in debate. Deep and thunderous the river roared in its rocky bed ; the wind shouted among the trees on the heights, and wailed round the house like a woman crying for shelter.

A glorious fire crackled in the grate, a shaded lamp glowed on the reading-table. Sitting in a huge leather chair before the fire, the Doctor pretended to doze. Under the lamp Walter pretended to read. From his half-closed lids the Doctor watched the strained expression of Walter's face, and noted that at every fresh gust he gave a perceptible start.

"If I thought it would mend matters," said the Doctor suddenly and gruffly, "I'd put an end to this eternal waiting—it's bad for the liver. You're getting as yellow as a guinea. 'All things come

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to those who wait,' some fool has said. Most things worth having have to be searched for ; and I'm beginning to think that if Bell is to be had, we shall have to search for her. What a gust ! Confound the thing—I'm developing nerves !"

The Doctor's voice was lost in the slamming of a door in the hall ; there was a shuffle, a flapping as of wet garments, a smothered sound of subdued talking. Before the two men had realised what had happened, the handle of the door turned, and a vibrating, sweet voice asked, " May I come in ?" and Bell stood before them.

An electric thrill shot through the two men ; they started to their feet, staring at a tall girl in a dripping waterproof, with the hood drawn over her head ; beneath the hood there escaped a cluster of auburn curls, damp with rain, and beneath the curls, a pair of brown eyes shone brilliantly.

She came out of the darkness like a bright spirit evolved amid distracting and perplexing elements. She looked untired, unexhausted, rich in possibilities and splendid womanhood. Morbid fears and nervous dread for her vanished instantly. With a delighted shout the Doctor sprang forward, but Walter was too quick for him ; the cripple forgot his crutch for the first time in his life ; he made a movement forward, and the next moment Bell's head nestled upon his shoulder.

" Bell !" was all Walter could say in a choking

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voice. The relief seemed too great. He thought himself prepared after the long waiting, but the sight of her was a new marvel, a new delight. He felt her trembling in his arms, laughing and crying in a breath, with the delicious scent of her hair and the rain blended in one. The touch of her soft flesh was an exquisite pleasure to him ; the warmth of her body melted the chill which had been at his heart. He held her from him and gazed at her with shining eyes, half blind with happiness ; then drew her back into his embrace, as though to assure himself that his suspense was really over.

When he could see beyond the dimpled face that had made the alternate joy and torment of his childhood, and could realise that others besides Bell were there, he looked past her and saw a tall form, shrunken and bowed, with a long white beard streaming upon his breast, and white hair almost mingling with the beard. Beneath brows which did their best to hide them, a pair of frightened eyes looked out. The terror in them struck Walter like a blow ; with an impulse of compassion, his arm fell from Bell's shoulder, he jerked himself forward on his crutch, and held out his hands.

" Father," he said, brokenly, and with deep feeling, " I am so glad you are come. It seems too good to be true."

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Arthur Searell made no reply, nor did he move, but, like one under the curse of death, who sees the sun shine on the morning of his execution, he looked out blankly ; minor troubles and regrets were forgotten, the smiling and caressing going on about him quickened not his pulse one beat ; a sigh that meant relief escaped him when Walter turned away.

Walter struggled with his emotion ; his face quivered and paled with a look of half shame common to strong natures betrayed into an expression of feeling. Something in his father's face—the fear in his eyes—imparted itself to him, and brought him into contact with the nightmare of the night long past.

The Doctor was in a state of confusion and misgiving. His hearty, " Glad to see you home again, Searell," had all but ended in a whistle of consternation when he met the old man's eyes. A curious awkwardness came over him ; his speech became a mixture of seriousness and banter. He had often rehearsed the meeting with Arthur Searell, and the forcible sentences he intended to deliver, but every spark of wrath and contempt died out at sight of the havoc wrought in the man before him. It was something more than human misery the physician saw in the rigid face and staring eyes. His professional instinct was stronger than his old grudge ; from that hour Arthur Sear-

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ell ceased to be a man to the Doctor, and became "a case," to whom he strove to bring forgetfulness and rest.

He shook hands, surreptitiously feeling his pulse, and quietly removed the wet mackintosh from the stooping figure, looking critically while he did so into the eyes which looked back at him, and losing something of their fear, for the expression of the doctor's countenance meant support.

It was a relief to him to turn again to Bell and contemplate anew her physical perfection. The courage and fearless purpose in her clear eyes made his own brighten. Here was no wreck cast up by life ; she aroused no feelings of vague discomfort ; it was no mockery to welcome her.

"A pretty how-d'ye-do you sprung upon us, with your Afric's sunny fountains and golden sands !" he said, with mock severity.

For answer Bell took his face between her hands and kissed him.

"You *are* a dear," she said, her eyes swimming with happy tears.

The Doctor stood as though dumbfounded, un-answering the gracious smile that gave him praise. Woman's love had been excluded from his life by his own hand ; for a moment he felt a sudden poverty and want, the next he frowned it down. The knowledge that he had taken the right course whispered consolation ; but, as was usual when he

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had been touched, his manner took on an added brusqueness, and his voice a gruffer tone.

Bell laughed at him softly, sure of his allegiance, and drew his attention to Ralph, who had halted at the door.

“ Doctor—Walter—this is Ralph.”

Ralph stood in the doorway, looking on somberly. The room Bell had so often pictured was there before his eyes ; the brother whom Bell loved, handsomer and stronger than he had thought ; the Doctor, with his kindly face and air of proprietorship and protectiveness ; and the appearance of distinction and well-being, the nameless refinement—all shut him out. A sob rose to his throat. Walter’s grave courtesy as he thanked him ; the way he drew Bell to him while he spoke, angered him, because it told him that he was an outsider ; that the days of his responsibility were over ; that he was no longer the only one who could protect Bell. What had been his dearest privilege was the prerogative of these men.

“ You needn’t thank me ; I did it to please myself,” he said defiantly, and made a movement as though to go.

The Doctor stared at the shabby figure, and ejaculated “ H’m !” in a tone of approbation. He saw at a glance how matters stood ; that Bell neither shrank from nor evaded observation in regard to her friend.

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"You'd better consent to a little friendly concession," he said, holding out his hand. "It's a slur upon my hospitality to think of going out again into the rain; and you are thinking of it, I can see. Be magnanimous, and help us to kill the fatted calf."

A muttering came from the corner where Arthur Searell sat by the fire. He had not spoken a word since his entrance into the house. They all turned to him now instinctively. He was leaning on his stick, looking into the glowing logs, apparently unconscious of any one.

"—The younger son gathered all together," he mumbled in low tones, which all heard distinctly, "and took his journey into a far country." He paused, and his voice rose half in glee, half in regret—"And there he wasted his substance in riotous living—riotous living! And when he had spent all—spent all—all! there arose a mighty famine in that land——"

He stopped, and stared still into the fire.

Walter went over and stood beside his father.

"It is a grand old tale, that," he said, with gentle hesitation, resting his hand on the bowed shoulder almost timidly, as though courting his father's attention. He pieced the story together, speaking in a low tone, his voice thrilling over the touching incident of the return; concluding with the words "Was lost and is found."

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The old man rose from his crouching attitude, and clutched his son by the arm.

"Who told you?" he asked, almost fiercely; "how do you know I lost it—how do you know? You have made a mistake!"

"Father," said Bell, coming near with pitiful eyes, and stretching out her hand, she laid it upon her father's arm. "What is it, dear? You look so bewildered! What has startled you?"

He turned from face to face, perplexed; then, letting his eyes rest upon the Doctor's, he said, plaintively, like a child that is tired, and would excuse its fretfulness:

"I am not well!"

The Doctor acquiesced in silent sympathy, and gently pressed the old man down into his chair again. Arthur Searell's mouth was working painfully; his brows were contracted as with anger, and Walter, at a loss for an explanation, looked helplessly from his sister to the Doctor.

"D. T.," said the latter shortly; and Bell and Walter gazed long into each other's faces, alternately flushing and paling in humiliation and shame intolerable, admitting silently what would not bear putting into words.

Walter was wrung to the heart; hot indignation rose in him for his sister's sake. She saw it with quick perception. With a little caressing cry she said:

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"Yes, I can—I can bear it! It has not always been like this; he has been ill lately. Ralph knows."

Ralph hoped that what seemed to these people such tragedy was nothing worse. Drunkenness might be redeemed. Society had not an inexorable judgment for it.

After the fatted calf had been partaken of somewhat sparingly—Bell attending to her father's wants as though he were her child—she sat down beside him, and told the others of their wanderings. Arthur Searell listened to all she said, and was very quiet. He let her story go on without comment, and heard her account of his wealth without corroboration; he seemed bowed with the thoughts and sufferings of years. When the dawn appeared he shivered and said he was tired, he would go home. Both Walter and the Doctor tried to induce him to sleep there, but he turned his face to Bell with dumb entreaty. She understood his look, and rose. Ralph rose also, and they went out into the twilight of the morning, the old man leaning upon Bell's arm. Bell thought of that other morning when she had left home leaning upon *his*. What Arthur Searell thought of no one knew; he walked as though his limbs were stiff, his eyes peering into the mist with that set terror in them.

The rain had ceased, and the rushing and roar-

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ing of the river came loud upon their ears as they descended into the glen. The old man stopped ; a spasm passed across his face.

" Save me !" he moaned, clutching Bell's arm tightly, and glancing over his shoulder with dilated eyes ; " they're after me—they're on me. I'm an old man."

" Father," said Bell caressingly, " wake up, dear ; we are not at Miners' Alley ; we are at home, where nothing can hurt you. What you hear is the river."

He straightened himself and went on again. When Ralph unlocked and opened the cottage door, according to his instructions, the man peered in before he entered, then staggered instinctively towards his old seat.

A huge fire was laid in the open fireplace, a lamp stood on the table, and when these were lighted, Bell gazed about her dumb with surprise and transport. It was here—all she had longed for—her small world set apart. The reality had outstripped her imagination. Here would begin a new life for her, a new time for them all, one they would make for themselves and for those they loved ; the past would flit away from them ; it was all over and done.

She met Ralph's jealous eyes.

" You must always stay very near to us," she said, gently. " In the old days you were leal and

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true—you shared my exile—you will share my friends?"

He shifted his eyes from her beseeching face. She put up her hands and held him by the lappets of his coat, not knowing how desperately hard she made it for him to say that he must go.

"You must lay your hands on the new times and feel them as you felt the old. We will learn together of the new life; we'll grow wise in its ways. We will labour and joy in it while we are young"—her eyes fell upon her father sleeping in his chair—"for old age comes so soon, and to old age there is no morning. Be friends with me, dear."

She was smiling at him through shining tears a little wistfully. How could he give her up? How relinquish her wholly? He looked at her and hesitated.

"What does it matter what I feel," he thought, "so long as I can look at her?"

But it was only for a moment that he yielded to the thought. There was no sense in his dawdling about, he said; he must be going. He wanted to see life a bit; it took a man to see other men at work to spur him to his own; it was a sight too easy growing into idle ways; and work saved more souls than the parsons did. He'd stay a day or two, just to see the old man better, and deliver into his keeping a packet he had belonging to him; then he would go.

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"Ralph," asked Bell, "is there nothing I can be to you? do you think I have no interest in your life at all?"

She put out her hands in pleading. Ralph looked at them, but he did not take them. His eyes cleared; he met her gaze, and spoke slowly:

"There is nothin' you can be to me, Bell; it ain't no good pretendin' I should be happy with friendship only. A man loves a girl, or he don't love her. If he loves 'er, 'e's gone past bein' satisfied with 'er for 'is friend, even 'is best friend. An' if 'e's honest, 'e'll own it. It's like puttin' water before one famished with thirst, an' tellin' 'im not to drink; or givin' a hungry man a taste o' dainties when 'e's famishin' for meat. If I were your equal, as your brother or the Doctor counts equality, I'd stand my ground, and fight it, if needful, inch by inch; but I ain't equal. While I could serve you, while there was no other to look to you, I stayed beside you gladly. I lengthened out the excuses why I shouldn't go; but now you're safe home, an' with them as won't let harm come nigh you if they 'ave their say, it 'ud be folly to stay—an' I've seen harm come many a time through a man puttin' 'imself in the way o' temptation."

Bell had stood listening, paling a little as he went on.

"I can't ask you to stay at any cost to your-

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self," she answered sadly. "I do not like to think of the days when you are gone. But what can I say—what can a girl say to the man who loves her, and whom she does not love?—except to wish him God-speed!"

"Almighty God 'as a deal to do in blessin' those His creatures won't bless!" he said.

Then, seeing the pain on Bell's face, he added quickly: "If you tell me to stay, I'll stay; but I can't share in your pleasure as I've shared in your trouble; I ain't learned the ways o' being glad. I should grudge them as made you happy; I should wish it was me. Bell," he added, coming nearer and speaking in a strangely constrained voice, "I should be jealous."

His eyes flamed, and Bell saw his strong hands tremble.

"I was jealous once at Miners' Alley," he went on hoarsely, "and it was hell! I've been jealous again to-night; an' when a man ain't got no right to find fault, an' no chance to make things better, 'e's a coward to stay an' bear a daily lashin', when a big wrench would set 'im free. I could die for yu, Bell; I could live to do you good—an' that's sometimes harder than dyin', it appears to me—but I can't stand by an' see another man win you. I've put it roughly, but the way of sayin' things don't change the nature of them. An' so, my dear, I'd best go. I shan't be too far off to hear

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you, if ever you call me. No other world would keep me, if it made you happier for me to come."

"I think you're wrong," she replied earnestly, "to put all pleasure out of your life like that. You'll never make me believe that it's better for you to go away among strangers than to stay with those who care for you—care very much for you—you never will understand that. And there is work enough for you to do here. Walter has found plenty, and so has Dr. Strong."

"Don't tempt me, Bell," he answered brokenly; "when one's inclination an' temptation go the same road, it's easy to follow. If my stayin' would make things easier for you, I shouldn't need much askin'. But it won't. It 'ud be hard for us both; it 'ud make you miserable to hurt me, an' me miserable to make you sore. Things as can't be mended are best forgot. An' don't think I shall go away alone; don't you fret over that, my dear; I shall take the memory of you along with me, an' it 'll be easier to live with that than stay an' see you change."

"Change? How should I change? What have I been to you in the past that I may not be in the future?"

She asked in all sincerity. She was pained at the thought of losing him. The natural covetousness of passion was unintelligible to her; she did

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not understand why he could not share her affection.

"Never mind, my dear," he answered, gently.
"I've talked in a jumble ; I haven't got the way
of makin' things seem clear."

CHAPTER XV

BELL'S HOUR

It was Bell's hour. She had waited, and watched, and won. The prodigal had been received home without recrimination or denunciation. She had yet to learn that there is no pardon ; that life keeps a balance sheet and correct reckoning, exacts so much for this and returns so much for that.

The young in heart believe in miracles—the resurrection of dead lives ; the dividing of great waters to make a passage for eager feet ; and Bell had faith that Dr. Strong's drugs would bring forth a live soul from the grave of Arthur Searell's burial ; that Ralph would cross from bondage to freedom on an easy path.

The Doctor scolded her in a growling voice for her past delinquency, and when he met her appealing glance, smiled involuntarily at the end of a tirade. Walter gave himself up to her in an ecstasy of love, and watched her with a sort of terror born of his religion. Bell had no profession of faith ; she still hunted for fairies. She smiled

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alike on good and evil, and bent, with suppleness of impulse and without discrimination, either right or left.

"Rubbish!" said the Doctor, when Walter expressed anxiety; "what do we want with a sentimental, hysterical girl. Bell's got the aboriginal instinct to avoid pain, and, my good boy, half the religion of the day is self-preservation in evolution. What you want to impress on a woman is this—that she's a large responsibility, and that God and man have a right to expect of her so to govern her life that she may bring healthy children into the world."

Three days after their return, Bell went out alone to hunt the sweets of her old haunts. She had re-tied herself to the allegories of her childhood, and sought the full revelation of their meaning. The old delights had been the child's gimlet-holes in heaven that let the glory through, and she wanted another peep at the promise of the wide expanse untouched. Her youth told her heart it had a right to joy, and she went seeking it in nature. She took her bronze head under the russet foliage by the river, her face earnest as with sacred purpose, a little flushed and expectant, gentle as a girl's face is when chasing joy. A stray shower pelted on the leaves, and, with a half laugh at her own foolishness, she made helter-skelter over the boulders to a small cave where she

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and Walter had played from a picture in "Hia-watha."

" In his lodge beside a river,
Close beside a frozen river,
Sat an old man sad and lonely,
Seeing nothing but the snow-storm
As it whirl'd and hissed and drifted."

Walter had been the old man, and she from the top of the cave had made the snow-storm, by lying on the bank and scattering down clover. But memories of real snow-storms destroyed the illusion, and while her eyes mechanically watched the big, bright drops splash into the river, her mental vision conjured up the craggy vastness of Southern Alps and the soft, thick, downy whiteness that fell upon them while she slept. She roused herself with a little shiver, and a suspicion of irritation : she had plighted her troth to re-enter fairy-land, and memory intervened. Could one never go back, never be the same thing twice, she pondered. She passed from the river bed, with only half assumed satisfaction sniffing the ferny fragrance of the rain-washed air. The sweet chill brought the colour into her face ; she could hear the birds stirring and protesting in the trees overhead, unreconciled to being driven home at such an early hour ; and swinging herself upon a bough, she whistled them sweet airs of their distant relatives, with tremulous cajolery ; and—it being win-

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ter—the feathered listeners asked themselves, with irony, why spring never brought such sweetness to be mated.

Bell flung herself down from the branch—the songs were songs of the South. Had she then told her father more truth than she knew, when she had said that the past made present bone and flesh? Must something always be brought along with you—recollections without actualities to fit them into? Couldn't one ever catch up on a time that held in itself all that was self-sufficing, full? Must one always be seeking to overtake, unable to realise, because unable to forget?

She turned to a stiff climb—things were easier climbing; the bracing air cleared the cobwebs. As she climbed and gazed around at the red volcanic soil and grim rocks, she remembered the path; it was the old steep track up which Walter had carried her to get a glimpse of the glory of the Lord. She laughed softly, and from some deep chamber of her being, there came a rush of feeling, part tenderness, part happiness, part pain. Her flesh and soul met in wistfulness; she thrilled with the expectation of her heaven, the sweet animal consciousness of self-intoxication. To be alive, to feel wants, to realise sensation—it was glorious! She no longer wanted to forget; but just to breathe in the air of mountains, and feel the blood warm and tingling in her veins. Colour

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mantled her cheeks, her bosom heaved under her bodice, her feet barely touched the track she climbed. She would go to the top, first to see the old spot and discover, if possible, the peak over which the moon had risen so far away. But, through all her tumult of feeling, she was conscious of a languor that almost hurt.

Then, from among the thicket, whence she was to have had her peep into heaven long ago, a baritone voice sang :

“ Thy fate and mine are seal'd :
I strove against the stream and all in vain :
Let the great river take me to the main :
No more, dear love, for at a touch I yield,
Ask me no more.”

Then, while Bell stood staring stupidly at the trees, the tune was changed :—

“ Oh ! father's gone to market town,
He was up before the day ;
And Jamie's after robins' nests,
And the man is making hay.
And, whistling down the hollow, goes
The boy that minds the mill,
And mother from the kitchen door
Is calling with a will—”

Bell flushed crimson, and obeying a sudden impulse, put her hand to her mouth, and sent the old familiar refrain into the thicket, “ Pol-ly, Pol-ly, the cows are in the corn !”

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She waited for a moment in trembling expectation—there was a crunching of undergrowth, a smothered exclamation, the trees opened, and Guy stood there with a small axe in one hand and a tin “billy” in the other. He dropped both, and, the next moment, held Bell’s hands in a grip.

Bell stood looking up at him laughingly. “Pirate,” she said, “you have stolen my song!”

Her heart was bumping under her bodice. The accusation she had begun boldly faltered almost to timidity.

He looked as though he could have stolen more than her songs,—and glad as she. His bronzed face had flushed to the roots of his hair. He remembered that he held her hands; then released them. Then she blushed because she had forgotten to take them away, but said frankly that she was glad to see him again. He replied that he was delighted; that, strangely enough, at that very moment he had been thinking of her, and the way she looked the morning he saw her first and heard her sing. He had appropriated the song, as she observed. Her voice had broken in upon his thoughts of her. He had remarked before, that, if you were thinking very hard of a person, you were almost sure to meet that person. She said it was remarkable that she should meet him just there. And then they both thought that, now the wonder had come about, it did not seem so

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strange. After all, there was a sense of fitness and completeness about the fact that robbed it of its strangeness.

"But I've been expecting to see you somehow," he proceeded; "there has been a sort of feeling of you in the air. Of course," he added, in modification of his statement, "I knew you lived on the Wanganui somewhere, and I—with my mate—have been surveying in the district for several weeks."

Bell had followed his lead through the thicket. On the spot where she and Walter had sat to watch for the rising moon, a tent was pitched.

"You camp here," she affirmed.

He nodded.

"I was just about to boil the 'billy' and make tea," he proceeded; "may I offer you some?"

And then, with hands as deft as a woman's, he gathered the sticks he had broken, and kindled a fire; and Bell, seated outside the tent upon the bracken with face upraised and smiling, her eyes filled with a new light, watched him and listened, half curious, half wondering, at her own delight in the encounter. There was no surprise at anything he said or did; he seemed to be answering her thoughts and meeting her desires, as a fortune-teller puts into words a maiden's dreams and fancies. The silence of her past wistfulness had found voice in him. His laughter expressed her

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own light-heartedness, and his boyish courtliness appeased her new-born desire for homage. The queenship of her sex rose in winsome mastery, subjugating and finding satisfaction in his loyalty.

But Guy was no subject to be scorned ; as he talked in his unrestrained, headlong way of his life under the open sky he warmed to simple eloquence, blurting out his condition like a schoolboy. When a lad he had lost father and mother both : had neither brother nor sister, scarcely knew the meaning of home ; had fought his own way ; hadn't found it so hard a way, taking one consideration with another ; knew the country from one end to the other, and the country people knew him—there were familiar faces in every district : sang at the country concerts and churches—anything to oblige the kind folk among whom he wandered ; could trace his pedigree to a bishop and a soldier ; there was more of the soldier in himself than the bishop, but he fought the elements instead of men. He could not claim heirship “unto vast estates of which he was basely defrauded,” but he “still bore the family arms.” His father, a poor younger son, had sought fortune in the colonies, and found death. He himself was in mind, body and estate, the son of a primitive people—a Bohemian who sang his way through conventionality. Yes, he had been urged, but vainly, to try for a

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name—to embark on a professional career ; but the penalty would be too great ; it would mean restriction and routine, and he preferred his audience under canvas, or round the camp fire, or beneath a farmhouse roof. Ever lonely ? No, there was almost always some one to talk to, and, when there was not, he tramped long distances, or climbed to the highest point near, and sang for company—it was grand to stand on a high level, independent and unrestrained, or sleep out under the stars.

Bell sipped her tea and listened, her face reflecting the young man's tell-tale looks. His pictures were real to her, not sketches of an incomprehensible world ; she had knowledge of their light and shade.

But, did he never pine for a place he could call home ? she asked. She knew that roving life. But no, she supposed men were different ; they never tired of wandering. He looked at the purple-clad figure bent slightly forward, the auburn ringlets straying over the fair brow ; and a new thought came to him—a woman created the home out of her own wants ; it was the expression of herself. Yes, he saw that now ; every home was the creation of the woman, and the man stayed there because of her. He supposed the reason he had never thought of home was that there had been no woman waiting for him there.

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Bell's eyes shone with gladness. Their common ground gave her a delicious sense of comradeship. If he had dwelt in a world apart, above or below her, realisation of his life would have been marred. There were not even the conventions of a different environment to come between them, much less that bottomless pit of dishonour. She was in touch with this simple life, its wanderings and fireside reunions ; she understood its pleasures and perils and its inexhaustible resources. An hour ago the isolation of maidenhood had overwhelmed her ; she had wandered in that ghost-world where a girl walks with fancies undefined and indistinct, gathering wild white flowers, thornless but scentless, and, with a heart big and strong enough for passionate realities, amusing itself with dreams. Now, with the involuntary confidence of love, she took her first step out of vagueness, and lost her sense of aloneness in the growing consciousness of that great truth, "and they twain shall be one flesh."

The eyes of the man were informing him of the beauty of the woman, wakening his heart to emotion and surprise, animating and stirring it ; and, while he spoke lightly, he flushed with a new sense of dissatisfaction. His ambitions looked stunted, his aims puny. Perhaps she would think his avoidance of evil a shirking of greater good. His voice grew humble ; the soft, bright eyes of

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the girl challenged his best, and he was like to choke over the poor performance of a man his words offered her ; but he was too honest to labour for his own embellishment. Confused aspirations intermingling with his reminiscences made him incoherent, and he started the descent of the cliff by Bell's side almost in silence. But the charm of her voice, the nameless perfections of her face and form, quieted his new unrest. She, like all good women, made his best possible to him, the essence of her virtue penetrating to his passion ; and Guy, startled one moment by his sudden need, was subordinated the next by the girl's gentle dignity.

They talked of small things in a new way, surprised at their own voices, which interpreted their gladness and wonder in one another more than the subject-matter.

The twilight deepened while they stepped briskly down the track ; the fresh smell of early winter made their inhalations sweet ; a profound harmony seemed to breathe from swaying bough and murmuring gorge ; and, when Bell's feet loosened a stone, he, with the man's prerogative of protection, stretched out his hand to guide her. Bell, unversed in coquetry, obeyed the instinct of the woman, and let her hand be held by his ; the prestige of sex made his guidance sweet, even while she smiled to think that she, who

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had climbed high mountains alone, should accept it.

He wore a knickerbocker suit of blue serge, with a cap to match, and the outlines of his strong, athletic figure were well defined. There was no air of weariness or depression, or even repression about him. His was the first spontaneous, glad spirit with which the girl had come into contact, and he answered to her need of joy. Her brother's gravity, the Doctor's practicality, her father's restlessness and Ralph's sadness—all alike were missing. His presence dispelled all sense of suffering.

They seemed to have entirely forgotten that they were strangers, till Bell, when they reached the stream, stopped suddenly and, blushing while she held out her hand, dismissed him with a soft "Good-bye."

"No, not good-bye—good-night," he answered eagerly and humbly. It was too dark to see the blush, but he endeavoured to detain the hand. It was withdrawn, however.

"Don't dismiss me as you dismissed me before. May I come soon and make the acquaintance of your father and your brother?"

"You will be welcome," she answered simply; then added, as an afterthought, "Ralph is here also—the friend who walked with me on the road at Miners' Alley."

"Indeed!"

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Bell detected a sudden coldness in his tones. She felt confused ; she could only see his figure indistinctly, and could not tell what was the expression of his face, but she saw that he stood upright and a little apart.

" Good-night !" said Bell, a second time, not knowing what else to say. He bared his head, and she turned and crossed the bridge. Quick footsteps followed, and, on the opposite bank, Guy overtook her.

" I will come to-morrow evening. May I ? To see you ? It is you I want to see."

" Yes," she faltered, and slipped past him on the path. He stood still and watched her till she disappeared in the darkness beneath the trees.

Before she entered the house, Bell stood on the veranda for a moment, to realise her sensation of discovery. A new heaven and a new earth had been created for her by the eager voice that had said, " It is you I want to see." She drew her breath with a long, happy sigh, feeling that half fear, half ecstasy that only the maid can feel when her lover elects her for the first time from all the world. She could not ignore that election, nor could she reason about it—but she felt sacred in her own eyes.

" I have had my peep into heaven," she thought, while she lifted her eyes to the fading sky ; then, with a face that reflected the starlight, opened the cottage door and went in.

CHAPTER XVI

RALPH'S OPPORTUNITY

BELL gave a little cry of alarm when she crossed the threshold ; an electric feeling of disaster was in the air. She felt confused, like one awakening from a pleasant dream to unpleasant fact.

The room was occupied by the Doctor, Walter, Ralph, her father, and two strange men, who saluted her respectfully when she entered. She looked from one face to another interrogatively. Her father sat in his chair by the smouldering fire of pine logs, mumbling and shaking his head, and trembling visibly. Instinctively the girl crossed to him, and placed her hand upon his shoulder.

There was an ominous silence ; the Doctor avoided her glance ; he looked flushed and angry, and had pushed the hair off his forehead till it stood on end.

Walter, pale and anxious, stood near Ralph, leaning heavily upon his crutch. His agitated face bore a look of questioning incredulity.

The table was spread for supper ; the red lamp glowed upon the white cloth ; it was plain an un-

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pleasant interruption had occurred. Ralph's face riveted Bell's attention. It was haggard and drawn, as on the night when the men had mocked his dead father. A clammy sweat damped the dark hair on his forehead, and it clung about his brow. He stood between the two strange men of determined attitude, and, when Bell entered the room, his head sank upon his breast. He raised it now and met her gaze with a slight shiver, and with the old dogged expression Bell knew.

"I've been arrested," he said hoarsely.

"Arrested?" Bell gasped, moving across the room. The officers of the law warned him.

"For assault and robbery!" he went on, looking deep into her eyes and seeming to draw courage from them.

"Assault and robbery? Of whom? Who accuses you?"

"The Bully."

"I don't understand," she answered.

The Doctor explained. A man, designated the Bully, had been robbed and assaulted in Auckland. Ralph had been searched, and the fellow's money found upon him. There was other evidence. The Doctor spoke testily; his tone expressed his irritation at the whole affair. Bell was to be dragged into public notice after all. He shot an angry glance at Ralph. It was like the impertinence of his class to intrude himself upon

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decent folk—with this affair hanging over his head, too ! He could have shaken Bell when she laid her hand upon Ralph's arm.

" I don't believe it ! " she exclaimed, a hot flush of indignation mounting to her cheeks, which had grown pale. " You will be proved innocent ! "

The Doctor snorted. A dull red crept slowly over Ralph's sallow face, he lifted his head in quick defiance, opened his lips with a movement as of retort ; then his eyes fell on Bell again, and he was silent.

" He can't be proved innocent ! It's impossible ! "

The words came from Arthur Searell. He had seldom spoken since his return, and his voice sounded harsh and cruel in spite of its quavering tones.

Bell met her father's eyes, and the fear in them struck her with a sudden terror. Walter saw that she choked back a stifled cry, and that, gradually, all hope and youth forsook her face, the rosy bloom of her cheeks fading to pinched, grey whiteness. Her mien lost its proud bearing of a moment ago, and dropped perceptibly as she concentrated her gaze upon the shrinking figure in the chair. She seemed to lose in colour and height, her joy withered under the influence of her fatal thought. By and by she drew herself up in an attitude new to those who watched her, and, pre-

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pared to face shame with proud endurance, turned with white lips to Ralph's captors, and asked with touching earnestness, "May I speak to your prisoner in private?"

When they were alone she turned to him almost fiercely.

"What do you know?" she asked breathlessly.

"I know nothin'," he answered shortly.

"Not anything?"

He shook his head.

"It may be a mistake?"

Her voice was eager, her face wistful.

Ralph nodded, avoiding her eyes.

"Ralph," she half whispered, laying her hand upon his arm, "I won't let you do this thing. You, whose pride it was to hold up your head before the world and to keep your name honest—you shan't do it, you shall speak!"

Ralph winced. She had touched him in his vulnerable point; all he possessed was his individual honesty; it was his one conceit. His eyes were dim with pain when he lifted them slowly.

"I know nothin'!" he reiterated.

"It's a lie, Ralph—the first lie you have ever told me. Look in my face, if you can, and repeat it."

He did look. His lips quivered.

"I know nothin'. Suspectin' ain't knowin'."

Then he laid his rough hand on the soft hand on his sleeve, and went on huskily:

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"But if I did know, I shouldn't tell. Ain't your heart set on 'im? Ain't he on his last legs? How long would he live in gaol?"

Bell shivered.

"Tell me that," repeated Ralph; "how long would he live in gaol? Long enough to disgrace your brother an' spoil his life, so that he couldn't hold up 'is head again. An' is the Bully worth it? You leave well alone, my dear. Suspectin' ain't knowin'—an' I can take care of myself."

"You can take care of me, you mean."

"Ah!" he answered, still caressing her hand; "that's what I'm afraid I haven't done, or I should 'ave looked after 'im better."

"In those words you admit your fear for him," replied Bell piteously. Then, with a low moan, she covered her face with her hands, as if to shut out some invading dread. Presently she looked into Ralph's face again with a rekindling of courage, and said:

"What you can bear, I can bear; there must be an end of your suffering for my sake. Ralph," she continued, "I should scorn myself if I selfishly received what I never could repay. I have been an ignorant, blundering girl. Until to-day I did not understand what it might be to bestow and to receive nothing in return. With the unconscious selfishness of a child I have permitted you to love me, and to lay at my feet the offerings of your love,

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without sense to perceive how bare you have stripped yourself to enrich me. But this afternoon"—she faltered, then raised her head—"up on the cliffs my eyes were opened. God opened them to see the value of a life and a life's love; and can I take both—now that I have learned what I have learned—and trample upon them? Take your heart and your life, with all their courage and patience, to use for my own selfish ends? I cannot. I could never expect God to be friends with me any more—never any more."

She was violently agitated, and, although her voice was low, it was distinct; her face was quivering.

"Ralph," she continued, placing her hand upon his shoulder and looking into his wondering eyes, pity and tenderness in her own, "I have put your love and your suffering from me lightly; I did not understand. I understand at last! And I should be wicked to permit you to do what you intend—to lift my burden, to carry my father's sin——"

He put his hand over her mouth, and glanced nervously at the door; then, still holding her, he said:

"There ain't no burden put upon me. I know myself. Do you think I could sit down an' see you struggle uphill with a load too heavy for you to carry? Do you think there'd be any sunshine for me, an' things for you gettin' blacker an'

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blacker? You talk o' wrong an' sin. I don't know much about that—things are in such a mighty queer mess that it's difficult to know what's right an' what's wrong ; but it seems quite clear an' straight that it's wrong to let a woman suffer when a man can save her."

His voice shook, he walked away for a few steps, then came to her again, and looked into the brown eyes almost with austerity.

"Mind," he went on, "I don't admit that there's anythin' to carry for you ; but, s'posin' there was? Every man 'as his turn, an' this is mine." He faltered. "Not that my life is more yourn to-day nor what it was before ; only my chance 'as come for provin' it. I guess there'll be others as willin' to live or to die for you equal with me ; but I don't envy none 'is chance, now I've got mine. I used to be afraid I'd never get it."

His eyes were shining, his voice was strong.

"Don't," said Bell, weeping bitterly—"don't break my heart. To save my father and my brother from disgrace, you are willing to sacrifice your life."

"I know nothin' !" he answered—"nothin' ! But I recollect you once said to me that old folks couldn't stand the storm, an' that the young 'ad many springs. There'll come another one for me, dear."

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"Ralph," said Bell, her weeping done, a worn, old look taking the place of tears, "we'll go through this together." She paused for a moment, faltered, then, taking his hand, went on hoarsely, "if trouble falls upon you for this, you shan't bear it alone; I'll bear it with you."

Ralph clutched the hand she had given him in a grip that hurt. A flush spread over his sallow cheeks, then faded away, leaving him paler than before.

"You mean that you would — marry — me?" The words halted on his tongue. "My God! me — the son of a criminal?"

"I am a criminal's daughter," she replied.

There was a look in her eyes that was new to Ralph. He had seen them glisten and sparkle with merriment, dim with tears, and wistful with unspoken longing; but they looked now as a girl's eyes might look who was gazing her last on life. He turned away his head.

"That is it," she went on in a toneless voice, as though the words were stifling her; "we will bear it together; it would be wrong of me to let you bear it alone. We never have been like anybody else; we have protected our fathers always; you will go on protecting mine for a little longer, and I will not turn a deaf ear to you any more. We shall have some happy hours together." She looked at his rough hands and ungainly drooping figure.

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"I have been everything to you," she proceeded, "and all that I have had for you has been the esteem that one gives to an old friend. I have turned for happiness to other situations than these. I have wandered in my imagination to high places. The desire for joy awake in me has been so strong, I thought it natural ; but, perhaps, I have made a mistake. Perhaps Walter is right, and duty is a happier choice than pleasure. If my mother had lived, she would have told me whether all girls find duty only too narrow and stiff to delight in. When I was a child, I did not miss my mother—I had toys. But now that I have done with playing, I want her so."

She bent her head forward and leaned it against Ralph's breast. "I ache with the want of her. She would understand all those empty spaces in a girl's knowledge ; she would know what I ought to do, for a woman's daughter is her own youth over again. It would be to her like telling her second self what she had found wisest and happiest once before. A girl without a mother is without eyes."

"Hang on to me, my dear ; I can't see far, but if we get knocked down, the horses shall trample on me first."

Ralph went away with his captors quietly to the tiny lock-up among the geraniums. Walter thought, when they wished him "good-night,"

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that there was a certain exultation in his look. Determination had taken the place of melancholy ; the unhappy expression had left his eyes, he held his head like a man.

"I am sure there is some explanation," said Walter to the Doctor, on their way home.

"It lies in your sentiment and softness of heart, then," replied the Doctor gruffly ; for, in the blindness of his love for Walter and Bell, he resented Ralph's connection. The morose-looking young man had roused his ire, for Ralph's love was no secret to the Doctor.

"I shall go to Auckland and see the matter through," proceeded Walter. "The man who stood by my sister in her hour of need shall not want a friend in her brother. We have talked a good deal together, and, although Ralph is very guarded and will not admit that my father's life has been one of much risk, I have received the impression that there is something underlying what we have been told. Ralph's quiet is not the attitude of guilt."

"My boy," replied the Doctor, irritably, "don't let your ideality create any exalted rôle for Ralph ; Morton. His devotion to your sister does not come under the head of sacrifice—it is animal magnetism. He is in love with her, and it is Bell's individuality that holds him, and not the noble quality of unselfishness—there is no such

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thing. Every action of our lives is in obedience to some human instinct."

"I believe he would absolutely surrender every desire of his life to serve Bell," affirmed Walter.

"H'm!" ejaculated the Doctor, quickening his pace; "but, bless my soul! what does that prove? It only proves that Bell has mesmerised him—unconsciously of course. It's sex, my dear boy, sex; not sanctity; he's thirsting, with a man's passion and a boy's ignorance, to bind the girl to himself. Go to Auckland; engage counsel and have this affair well sifted, but, for God's sake, don't permit your sister to drift into a false position; she might find it disastrous. Mind," continued the Doctor, "I don't share your suspicions of something wrong. I firmly believe the young man guilty—he comes of a bad stock; but, for everybody's sake, you must reduce your suspicions to the smallest parts. Spare no expense. Hang me, if I don't go myself! I'll get some one to look after my patients and go. There shan't be any complications, if I can help it."

They walked along in silence for a few moments, the Doctor turning his head occasionally to get, if possible, a glance of Walter's face; but the night forbade it. Presently the man broke the silence:

"I've offended you, I know, boy. I've got an objectionable way of putting things. I'm no poet, but a practical man. I touch things coarsely and

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materialise them. A psychological explanation would delegate to the sensuous, half the heroics put into verse. Love is an impulse of nature, the satisfying of a sense."

"In what category do you class your affection for me?" asked Walter quietly, when they halted at the house-steps.

"Eh? In what category? The gratification of the instinct of fatherhood."

"I thank God for that fatherhood," said Walter with a fond, intense look. And the Doctor went into his study, with all the hard lines in his face smoothed out.

"Your life is a system of negation," continued Walter presently. "You can't deceive me. You pretend to distrust; your days are a living faith. The harsh struggle of your boyhood for knowledge and bread, and the freedom with which you abundantly bestow, deny your creed of selfishness. You keep nothing of what cost you so dear. There isn't a house in the township but has a proof of it."

Walter laid his hand on the Doctor's arm and went on in that bold confidence the man had ever loved:

"I wish you wouldn't deny the love of God and man that prompt you. Sometimes I am afraid you are misunderstood. Not everybody perceives that the man doesn't always feel the least who puts the brake on the expression of his feeling."

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"By George, you're a born parson ; what a gab !" laughed the Doctor, very red about the face. "I can never make out, why you didn't go in for a pulpit."

The quick eyes of the man saw the eager face change, sadden, and flush sensitively.

" ' First remove the beam which is in thine own eye, ' " he said, with a sadness that was almost stern, then turned and left the room. The Doctor, listening, heard the crutch go slowly and haltingly. He knew that Walter's beam was Arthur Searell.

CHAPTER XVII

REFINING

BELL stood at the window of her room and looked out. The sound of the river reached her ears ; the night wind sighed among the trees and grasses ; the cliffs were but dimly outlined, and, above the summit she had climbed that afternoon, a solitary star kept watch. Her sad eyes were raised to it unconsciously, and unconsciously she received a little warmth at heart from the companionship of the gleaming thing. Her face was meek, patient, ashamed. At first she submitted to the blow silently ; her new hope was now a far-off impossibility ; but little by little passion re-awakened ; the memory of a voice, a touch, quickened life within her, and sent the warm blood leaping to her heart. To-morrow Guy would come, and she would be gone. Her place was beside Ralph, and, if he should suffer for her father's sake, her life was pledged as reparation. The long humiliation frightened her. All the long years she, and Walter also, if he ever knew, must bear the shame of her father's sin. She would

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save her brother that, if possible. Then a wild hope sprang up that, after all, there was some mistake. She was certain that her father had gambled away all the gold he had sacrificed their lives to gain ; his silence on the subject told her that, his meekness in presence of the son over whom he had threatened to triumph.

She turned from the window and looked slowly round the room she had left that morning long ago, half reluctantly, half eagerly, and remembered the note she had pinned to her pillow—the note in which she had promised Walter half what was hers. Was that half to be shame? She thought of him as she had seen him among his boys only that morning. The long room and the upturned faces ; and Walter at the end of the room, proud and happy in his guardianship, came forcibly before her. After the long toil of years was he to be humbled? She stifled with Ralph's own arguments a voice that clamoured for Ralph. Ralph loved her better than his good name, and she would be its substitute. They had been companions in misfortune so long, they could still endure together. Then the forlornness of the prospect frightened her, and her heart called out pitiously that there *must* be some mistake.

She went out hurriedly into the living room, and then remembered that her father was in bed, the Doctor, even in the excitement of the evening, not

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having overlooked his nightly ministrations to his patient. She entered Arthur Searell's apartment quietly, shading the light she carried with her hand. Sleep, like death, is kind, and the man breathed gently. The cunning eyes were closed, the weak mouth was composed, and the grey hair and beard gave him the look of a sleeping patriarch. Only his hands gave any indication of unrest, and they occasionally twitched on the coverlet where they lay."

Bell's eyes brimmed the while she gazed. Her little hand stole out and touched the fine white hair. Right, justice, reason, all were forgotten; unquenched love for him returned at a bound.

"He is so tired, so old, I will let him alone," she murmured, and a sob heaved her breast. He ever came closer to her in his weakness than in his strength. Her latent maternity put out its protecting instinct. He might be culpable, but, in her greed of youth for personal happiness, she could not condemn his last hours to bitterness and shame. While she stood, her tearful eyes fastened upon him, he suddenly opened his, and a spasm, half of fear, half pleasure, disturbed the unusual serenity of his face. With a gesture of entreaty he cried out piteously, "Helen!"

Bell flushed suddenly. He had mistaken her for her mother. His brain was confused with the drug the Doctor had administered; and while

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Bell stood, partly dismayed and partly glad that her father saw a resemblance to the woman he had loved, he went on humbly :

"I have dreaded meeting you, but now I don't care—your face is so kind." He reached up and took her hand.

"Don't go away again," he sighed, as he fell back upon the pillows, drowsiness overcoming him ; "this is—unexpectedly sweet."

He was asleep in a moment, and Bell's tears fell in big drops. He held her hand in a grip which relaxed as his sleep grew more profound. Bell's conflict ended. She knew of right only in a vague way, her affection and mercy were at all times strong ; in the impulsive immaturity of emotion she decided ; and the martyrdom which, in saner moments, was unapproachable both for herself and Ralph, seemed to be the only thing possible.

The next day the party were on their way to Auckland. Arthur Searell would be wanted as a witness, and, to Walter's comfort, Dr. Strong accompanied his patient, first having telegraphed to Wanganui for a substitute in Pareora during his absence. The Doctor thought bitterly that his last holiday had ended in disaster, and he wondered what would be the outcome of the present. There was some time to wait before the Auckland assizes, but that was an advantage ; he could busy himself on Ralph's behalf, and hold a consultation

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with an eminent brain specialist regarding Arthur Searell. The Doctor had become intensely interested in his new "case." The man who had once distrusted him so fatally, clung to him like a frightened animal seeking protection from pursuers ; and, though the Doctor would have said "Stuff and nonsense !" if any one had charged him with so soft a sentiment as pity, the mental and physical weakness of the man tugged at his sympathies, as weakness always did. The man of science had no room for prejudice, he affirmed, and he put down to the solicitude of the physician anything that approached tenderness in the man.

Walter watched them depart with a worn, anxious look on his young face. So soon as he could be relieved at the school he was to follow.

"What do you mean by that white face, sir?" demanded the Doctor, while he wrung his hand. "Can't you trust your belongings to me? I'll keep an eye on them ! Go indoors and get some food."

Bell drew closer to the Doctor involuntarily while he wrapped the rugs about her in the buggy ; his strength and cheerfulness reassured and calmed her. He did not share her suspicions of her father, she thought, nor perceive, as she did, Searell's shrinking unwillingness to go. In reality the Doctor had been disturbed by Walter's vague hints. But fact was fact, he told himself

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reassuringly. Ralph had been accused, he was the friend of his boy's sister ; and guilty or not guilty, the man was prepared to spend his last penny in defence. Deep down at the bottom of his heart, in spite of Walter's faith in him, the Doctor believed in the young man's guilt. He formed his judgment on the evidence of Ralph's ancestry ; but should there be the faintest shadow of a doubt, he would sift it. He glanced at the face of the girl beside him ; for, come what might, she must not, she should not be saddled with a responsibility that would burden her for life. Her children must call her blessed.

The Doctor's underlip drooped. He laid his hand with a protective gesture on the small, folded hands resting on the fur of the rug, and looked keenly at the purple-habited figure stooping slightly forward in an attitude of sorrow immersed in thought, and gazing with unseeing eyes at the bright stream beside which they bowled, and at the foliage glancing and gleaming in the light of the winter's sun. The children stopped to watch the buggy pass, and looked admiringly at the beautiful lady ; the bended form of an old woman straightened and gazed enviously. Childhood and age alike thought regretfully of an unknown state, with that eternal ache for satisfaction which deems each alien lot happier than its own.

Meanwhile Guy made melody on the cliffs.

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The clear sky and shining sun threw into distinct outline every crag. There was a suspicion of frost in the air that invigorated, and physical well-being gave the young man a sense of strength and freshness only possible to innocence and youth. There were no painful landmarks in his past pointing "this way to dishonour;" his conflict with life had been a clean one; he had set at defiance naught that bore the flag of righteousness. And so he sang—sang in sheer joy—joy so complete that in it there was no note of gratitude, for as yet he had found no loss, and so received no consolation.

In this mood of satisfaction, stirred with sensuous longing, he strode down in the twilight to the valley like one entering a kingdom. The fresh-blowing breeze fanned his bronzed cheeks, and, lifting his cap, he gave expression to his new craving in old song :

" When other lips and other hearts
 Their tales of love shall tell,
In language whose excess imparts
 The power they feel so well,
There may perchance in such a scene
 Some recollections be,
Of days that have as happy been,
 And you'll remember me."

The passionate cry rang out on the tranquil evening as an affirmation. The prophetic divina-

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tion of love invested the words with power. He sang them to a sweet face framed with auburn hair. He saw the purple-clothed form of a girl nestling like a wayside flower among the heather. His step quickened, and the timid rabbits, cropping their supper from the juicy grass, scurried away in terror to their burrows. But they needed not, had they known it, for the tall, strong man carried within him a heart so attuned to life that the life of his dumb brothers to him was sacred.

In good cheer he crossed the black bridge spanning the stream, and followed the path where Bell had disappeared. With a throb of anticipation he saw the lonely cottage sheltering beneath the hills and trees. He stopped short and regarded it for a moment, noting the brown thatched roof and the veranda massed with vines; then, with another heart-bound, stepped to the door.

The door stood ajar. No genial glow and warmth flooded the apartment, but in the grey light, in the middle of the room, knelt a solitary figure, a crutch beside him on the floor. His hands were clasped and his face was raised, and on Guy's glowing heart there fell the faltered words: "Be patient with this inextinguishable need of joy. God of sorrow as well as happiness, I take this from Thy hands, for there is none other to help us but only Thou, O God."

The cripple rose. With the look of a man called

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suddenly from the contemplation of the infinite, he went slowly to the door.

Guy, with a chill sense of baffled passion, asked for Bell.

"Gone," said Walter slowly; "she left for Auckland this morning."

Guy turned silently. There was nothing at that moment to be said, questions would come later. All he realised was a blank loneliness, a loss. He turned mechanically to the township, drawing to himself the attention of groups of gossipers. The substance of their talk was the arrest of yesterday. It was a blur on the smooth surface of life at Pareora. *Pakeha* and Maori alike had found fun for gossip in the sudden reappearance of the old man and his beautiful daughter, and their as sudden departure. Speculation had proved tormenting, and the sad face of the schoolmaster made the hearts of Pareora ache. It was shaken with emotion, but it drew its breath with relief in the thought that the Doctor had a hand in the matter. Little he undertook failed.

The groups grew silent and stared at the young man striding the twilight street. His face was not discernible, but there was a look of young impatience and strength about his figure that fascinated the trembling old men as well as the matrons and the maidens. Girls, feeling his personal beauty, instinctively drew themselves up coquettishly, and

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pushed curling locks away from shining eyes ; but, as with Adam in the beginning, there was only one woman to Guy.

He took, unknown to himself, the road she had first danced along in quest of gold, and in his first emergence from contented ignorance he was as much at sea as she had been. These new sensations were strangers to him. A moment ago life had been exultation ; now a painful bitterness and a longing to overtake the distant were outpictured in his face and hurried pace. Youth walks imperial ways, and will not be commanded, but commands, and this first check was brushed aside with energetic mind. He saw himself the overtaker of his fate, yet as the evening deepened on the downs, and the starry stillness of the vaulted heavens spoke, the echo of the cripple's prayer resounded in his heart :

“ Be patient with this inextinguishable need of joy ; . . . for there is none other to help us but only Thou, O God.”

At a remote corner of the downs he came to the farmhouse where Arthur Searell and Bell had rested on the morning of their flight. The house was a whitewashed structure, and gleamed dimly through the starlit space surrounding. It had the friendly aspect of association for Guy, and one red-curtained window glowed a welcome.

His knock was answered by the woman who

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had given Bell tendance. Her face was older, her figure more matronly than before, but there was still the same genial warmth about her manner.

"Come in," she said, when Guy saluted her, and she led the way to her kitchen, opulent with hams and onions on the string, depending from the ceiling. For a colonial household it is never too early or too late for tea, and here the kettle hung over the glowing logs. Instinctively the woman prepared the fragrant draught.

"I'm late to-night for an early household, Mrs. Owen," said Guy, taking a seat at the hearth; "but I haven't been in this district for a long time. Finding myself within walking distance, my feet took possession of my body, and here I am."

The woman looked at him with slow scrutiny.

"Your laugh's got a catch in it, boy," she answered. "You're tired, maybe; but you're welcome. As you say, it's a bittish late for early folk like us, but I'm waiting up for father and the boys. They've been doing business in Wanganui." Then, eyeing him meditatively, she attracted his attention to the food.

"Do you always sit up for the men folk?" asked Guy, smiling and looking up. She was brooding near him like a hen over a stray chick.

She nodded.

"The house is lonesome without a woman-face

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to bid a man welcome. Aye, boy, I wonder that you don't get married," she added, refilling his empty cup.

Guy laughed, but without his usual gladness. "Is married life so happy, then?"

The woman thought for a moment, then she replied: "It's this way in life. Almighty God has put a price on all things, good and evil, and you can't have neither one nor the other without paying for them. If a man or a woman goes free from bonds, they go free from many a burden; but freedom's a lonesome sort of comfort. The man and the woman who's willing to pull a heavier load, two in harness, gets recompensed by company; for in company one can travel a goodish bit further over a rough road without tiring than by taking it singly. I'm not for loneliness myself," she proceeded, seating herself in a great cane rocker and gently rocking. "A lonesome trouble is a wearing trouble; the sound of one's own voice is wearisome. My man an' me has been yoked together for more than twenty years, an' we're getting to know how to ease each other. When I'm sore, he pulls hard, an' when he's tired, I put on a spurt. But it ain't all pull—there's the stable and the corn."

Her homely face glowed softly in the firelight. She had grown, for the moment, young. Guy, eager for testimony of experience, moved opposite

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on the hearth, and by attentive silence encouraged her to proceed. She scanned him scrutinisingly, and shook her head. "But the corn must be earned, lad. We're put into love's shafts for discipline, linked together with the glamour and heartburnings and desires of youth, so that we don't fear the whip. An' we must be whipped till we're well broke in an' take to the road freely. It's God's will to have us tamed. But youth kicks against the bit, boy. It's natural for strong limbs to run free."

She broke off for a moment and looked into the fire, then added : "We take the good of life, dear, without a thank you, or with your leave, or by your leave ; but I doubt me if ever trouble came to mortal but he felt offended with the Almighty an' thought what happened hadn't ought to have. We're like that ; we're greedy for feasting, an' cry out at the stomach-ache. We hate paying the price. An' it's the same with love. So long as there's a young heart in the world it will crave it, not seeing that love asks humility an' courage, not knowing that the beginning of love is the beginning of sorrow, for it's not God's way to frighten young hearts off their greatest good ; so the first charm is like the mist of early morning that hides the road, an' prying eyes are blinded. An' it's best, dear, it's best ; for with all its crooked turns the path of love leads up. Men an' women dis-

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cover that by the time the day grows hot, but few would go back by then. They've had a glimpse of something besides each other's face."

It seemed to Guy that his homely friend had had that glimpse. Her lips trembled and her eyes shone.

"What does one see?" he asked softly.

"That is a man's test," she answered. Then, with a swift change of countenance and voice, she asked,

"What is the news of Pareora?"

The question was a stab to him.

"I only passed through on my way to-night," he replied.

"Well, one of my boys rode from there this morning, and he brought me news of Dr. Strong and the schoolmaster. Perhaps you never heard that the schoolmaster's father left these parts with his little daughter years ago—nobody knew for where. Strange enough, he called in here and asked for a rest for the child. I only guessed afterwards who they were; a lovely thing she was, exquisite beautiful, with long auburn hair; an' she lay down on that sofa an' slept her fill, bless her!"

Guy suddenly roused into life. He looked at the broad cushions tenderly.

"Bell Searell!" he exclaimed incredulously.

"You know her, then?"

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"I saw her first at Otago goldfields, and again yesterday."

"Ah! You've heard what's happened likely? No. There was a young man on a visit there. He's took up, an' the Doctor an' Miss Searell have gone back with him to Auckland. I haven't got the rights of it, but that's certain. And the schoolmaster and the Doctor are in sore trouble—perhaps the young lady is going to marry the young man."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Guy, with a sickening sense of jealousy recalling Bell and Ralph as he had seen them on the road at Miners' Alley. "He is rough and uncouth—and accused of crime, you say? Impossible!"

"When you get to forty-five years you won't think much impossible this side the grave. I've heard a deal stranger things. But if it's trouble that's come upon the Doctor and the young schoolmaster, I'm sorry. The Almighty don't often dress His saints in trousers, but when He does, they're very becoming. An' those two have been measured for a pair. I could tell you tales in plenty, but I hear the cart, an' father an' the boys 'll want their supper."

When Guy stood at the door next morning ready to depart his hostess joined him. The grey vapours covered the downs and hid the distant road. The day was sunless and misty, but it was not actually

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raining, and the two looked out at the cheerless prospect silently. After a moment or two the woman reached up and buttoned the collar of his mackintosh ; then, in a quiet voice, as though concluding a conversation, she said, " Go right on, and God bless you, dear."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE TRIAL

RALPH'S trial attracted little attention. The body of the court was occupied by the usual loungers, who seemed interested less in the prisoner in the dock than in the young lady who sat near the bench with her brother—evidently her brother—and their friend. Ralph, in a calm tone, pleaded "Not guilty," and, after one long, meaning look into Bell's quivering face, turned resolutely to the Bench. He stood more erect than usual. He was deadly pale, but his determined mouth was firmly set, and his voice, when he spoke, though deliberate and quiet, could be heard at the other end of the court.

"He's a hardened customer, he is," whispered one woman to another. "Hope he gets it strong; looks fit for murder, he does, every inch of him."

He had determinedly refused to be defended. "Least said, soonest mended," was the only explanation the irate Doctor could drag from him, and, as the prosecutor laid the facts in his possession before the court, what little faith the Doctor

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had retained in the innocence of the young man fell away bit by bit.

Ralph listened attentively ; he was curious to know how suspicion had fallen upon himself.

His hatred of James Brown—nicknamed the Bully—was very manifest, for, as evidence was brought to testify to his old grudge at Miners' Alley, and the incident at the shanty given as a motive for revenge, his hands twitched upon the dock-rail as though with an impulse to strangle. His suppressed rage was visible in every shaking limb. The Bully honestly believed the accused had tried to murder him, partly out of revenge and partly to become the possessor of Arthur Searell's money, in the belief that the sum was greater than it was ; for it transpired that, with the exception of a hundred pounds, the old man had lost it to one and another. Arthur Searell had appointed an hour upon the evening in question to have a friendly game with several old pals. Old pals gave evidence in due course. The Bully proceeded to narrate how he had strolled to meet the old man, and overheard the accused threaten to knock Arthur Searell over the head if he didn't hand over his purse.

This caused a slight sensation in court, but Ralph had recovered his self-control and seemed undisturbed. The Doctor glanced at Bell, who was very pale, but showed no signs of surprise, or

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—as the man of facts thought—of doubt of the innocence of her friend. The hand he clasped trembled a good deal when the night porter of the hotel corroborated this evidence, and detailed the fight enacted in his sight, and the threat of accused to kill the prosecutor, also his absence all night. The stick was produced bearing his name. The doctor who had been called in to attend the prosecutor affirmed that the blow had been struck with the stick, and one of the old pals before sworn further testified to the fact of Arthur Searell's departing "friendly and quiet" at a given time, and to seeing Ralph—when he himself was returning from a stroll on the wharf—passing the end of the alley where he and his mate, James Brown, were staying. Entering the house, he saw his mate lying on the sofa with his head bashed in. The purse found upon Ralph was produced and proved to be the Bully's. It was a rough leather purse of common make, fastening with a strap, and contained, besides bank-notes, private papers belonging to the Bully.

Arthur Searell was so weak and shaky that he was accommodated with a chair. His patriarchal appearance won sympathy and attention, and the prosecuting counsel did not distress him more than necessary, for it was plain he gave his evidence with great pain and reluctance. He cast one wild look at Ralph, rose hurriedly, as if to speak, then

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glancing at Bell, and from her to Walter's watchful face, sat down again in silence. He leaned upon his stick and, unconscious that for the time being he monopolised attention, stared straight before him, seeing nothing and answering incoherently, as thus :

It was true that the accused was violent upon occasion, but he was a good fellow, a quiet fellow, honest and harmless. Couldn't remember the quarrel of the night in question. Had been drinking—couldn't remember anything at all about it. Had possessed previously a large sum of money, but had speculated in various ways on the homeward journey and lost it ; altogether unlikely that the accused had intended to rob him.

Ralph's early associations and antecedents told against him. He groaned audibly, as if in actual pain, when his father's name was resuscitated. He had left him lying on the mountain, and it seemed that the Almighty had mocked him. He listened to the learned counsel's allusions to his own violence, and felt numbly that the name he had kept clean was soiled forever—torn to shreds beyond hope of mending. But the story of his resentment of the insult put upon his dead father, graphically sketched as it had been, had warmed the jury in his favour. The Bully's hideous face, made more hideous by bandages, repulsed the onlookers and won no sympathy. They did not for-

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get that he was the ringleader of the shanty incident, and when the evidence for the prosecution was concluded, not many of those present were in favour of severe punishment of the prisoner.

At last, after what seemed a lifetime of anguish and shame for Bell, the jury retired, the judge left the bench, the prisoner was removed, and those in court broke up into chatty groups.

Walter, who had not spoken during the proceedings, but had watched and listened with strained attention, now turned to Bell with a look of puzzled scrutiny; then, pale and grave, waited in silence the reappearance of the jury.

The Doctor, with an air of certainty that the right thing would happen, talked cheerfully at large, not waiting for any answers. That Bell had not been called was worth all the time and money he had spent. In half an hour the jury returned, and the judge once more took his seat upon the bench. The prisoner, paler, if possible, than before, was brought back to the dock.

Bell scanned the faces of the jury with frightened eyes.

Then came the challenge and the foreman's reply "Guilty," with a recommendation to mercy, and the prisoner was sentenced to two years' hard labour.

The evidence was strong, but Bell knew that it was from lack of some important fact that Ralph

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had been condemned ; further, that none but Arthur Searell could supply that fact. But if her father had wilfully closed his mouth, surely he did not realise the consequence. Could he measure or define the enormity of that which he had done ? There was a look of agony in his eyes that was torture to the girl. She would have given much to know whether he was conscious of Ralph's sacrifice, but she could not read what lay behind that inscrutable expression ; still she fancied that, under its apparent indifference, there was a gleam of defiance and reminiscence.

It was now the middle of July, and the busy city, blurred by rain, seemed indistinct and unsubstantial. The storm-beaten prison, enwreathed in the mists from the hill above, was to the girl the only definite reality of the past and present, the only thing that remained of all that had been in actuality or promise ; and, haunting its vicinity—drawn there irresistibly—all her past speculative horror of a prisoner's lot became crystallised in the misery of Ralph. Her filial love and her desire for Ralph's liberty fought hard. Ralph, who from behind the bars of his cell watched the clouds drift across the stars, did not suffer as did she.

Then came a day when she was allowed to visit him. She walked with feverish haste along the road she had often taken with him. It had been

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raining all the morning, and the mists hung about the hills. At one moment the sea, robbed of glint and shine, lay like a thing oppressed, but at the next the sunbeams, bursting fitfully through the scudding clouds, put warmth into the water, and the green, cold waves became alive with golden ripples. A gust of wind blew a shower of falling leaves and water-drops into her face. Ah, how good it was to be abroad ! In every mood nature was enchanting ! The white and purple mist seemed lovingly to veil the rugged peaks, as though to hide the wrinkles on their face.

With a shudder Bell heard great keys turn in clanking locks and the door close behind her. It was the punishment of her father's sin she had come to witness. She understood now his sudden departure from Auckland and his incoherent mutterings. Delirium and sleep betrayed what fear kept guarded. She felt her father's disgrace in every nerve ; in pity for his age and cowardice she had permitted Ralph to suffer in his stead ; but she could not for an instant forget that she was the daughter of a criminal.

She was conscious presently that Ralph stood before her. The brand upon his clothes branded *her* also. She flushed crimson from head to foot. When she lifted her eyes to Ralph's face there was no shame there. She wondered at it. It had appeared a plain face to her in her first knowledge of

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it ; at the end of a week she had thought it no longer plain, for she had seen his eyes soften and flash with emotion. Long ago she had ceased to criticise the features, although she knew the face quite well ; but to-day she wondered ; the sad, determined look was almost obliterated by an illumination—a glow of enthusiasm and an expression of nobility that mocked Bell's grief for him.

“ Is this my girl ? ” he asked softly. In Bell's eyes was the record of her conflicts, but the chilling hopelessness that had benumbed her melted under his calm strength and intentness. She drank in his look of love and courage, as the lost wanderer gazes at the deep serenity of the starlit sky.

“ Yes, ” she answered firmly.

He mused on her and smiled—a smile half tenderness, half compassion. “ Bear up, my dear, ” he said gently ; “ a trouble fairly met and fought is done with for aye. Hearts don't break like dried twigs in the wind. So don't you fret, there'll come another spring. I'll bide my time. Now go, my dear. ”

“ And you won't tell me how you came by the purse ? ”

“ I'll maybe tell you one day—not now. ”

CHAPTER XIX

SILENCE

WITH their return to Pareora, Dr. Strong felt that a load had been removed from his mind. A very disagreeable affair had been got through, and Bell's disreputable and presumptuous friend was out of the way. His short acquaintance with the girl was an evil that could be left just as it was, without anything to add to it.

The relations between father and son were strained. The sympathetic attitude Walter had assumed on Arthur Searell's return changed to cold aloofness, the old man's demeanour oscillated between a superficiality of affection and suspicious watchfulness. On the occasions of his son's visits to the cottage—Walter still resided with the Doctor—the old man frequently relapsed into a sulky silence, refusing both medicine and food, as though he resented the fact that he was dependent upon his son's bounty. The young man made persistent efforts for his father's physical comfort, forgetting nothing that he thought would conduce to ease or health ; but his inter-

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course stopped at the civilities of common courtesy.

Bell also had changed, the old childlike spontaneity had departed ; she busied herself assiduously about the house, performing each menial task with self-imposed thoroughness. When the Doctor rallied her on the fact that self-culture had, a short time ago, seemed to her of more importance than the knitting of men's socks, she looked at him as though, for the moment, a pleasant sight had crossed her vision, then said quietly that she had changed her mind ; that there were different kinds of knowledge, and that she wanted to become a careful housekeeper ; then bent her fair head over the coarse grey sock.

The Doctor watched her interestedly. It was remarkable, he thought, how the thrift and neatness of the Quakerish mother was pushing its way through the girl's passionate love of pleasure. He squinted at her critically through half-closed eyes. No, he didn't quite like it ! No, he did not ; there was something about the old, merry, laughing Bell one could contemplate with a smile.

Bell did not count her griefs over in self-pity ; she did her best to take root in alien soil. Any straggling sense that put out its feelers to the sun she trampled on ruthlessly, and, in the cold shadow that had fallen upon her youth, tried her utmost to live her life.

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But the strain was more than any one knew. There were days when her father clung to her in helpless anguish, crying that it would be better for them all if he were dead. After a day like this, all his force spent, he would lie passive, watching his untiring nurse with wakeful attention, while she, with pitying tenderness, tried every art to close the feverish eyes.

Bell battled through these dark hours alone, by her own force bearing her own part, for she dreaded that what her father imparted in his night delirium might reach other ears than her own. In his ramblings he told, in broken sentences, the history of his unconfessed guilt, building up by slow degrees the history of the night for which Ralph bore the blame.

It was agony to sit, chill hour after hour in the partial darkness of those winter nights, listening to the endless repetition interspersed with sharp cries for mercy. Her father's miserable clinging to life, his absence of honour, and of the bold courage of his evil deeds that stamps a strong villain with a certain dignity, would rouse Bell's scorn, but as a mother can despise and go on loving, can give from the bounty of her protectiveness a covering to shelter her young from the consequences of their misdeeds, so Bell's motherhood sheltered this man, whose mind and conscience were powerless to rise above his animal fear. His

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weak susceptibility to suffering wrung her heart, and she found herself understanding why her strong mother had ever become this weak man's wife. In those moments when her mother's womanhood came into touch with her own, she would bend down and caress her father's hands or hair, as though sensible that Helen Searell's love would bestow to the end.

Her father might yet confess to her and remedy his wrong, she thought, for sometimes he seemed but half conscious of her presence, and would summon her in her mother's name to come nearer and listen while he told her what he had done to her boy.

When the ramblings from the bed ceased—as they invariably did in the small hours—Bell would go to her own room, and, with a thought of Ralph lying on his hard pallet, feel guilty that her own bed was soft ; then, removing the bed, would lie on the hard mattress, trying in a childlike way to go halves in his discomfort, sensible all the time that nothing could make things honest.

These nights did the work of years. God's great law of retribution forced the truth upon her—that a life is demanded for a life ; that one cannot remove his neighbour's landmark without himself losing the way. To learn that in one's teens is worth the destruction of some illusions.

During the day Arthur Searell walked calm and

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at large among his fellows, but sleep took him into captivity, and then delirium triumphed over secrecy, and bid fair to make vain Ralph's false position and her own. They had undertaken to suffer in the sinner's stead, but in spite of them justice was being done. In ignorance they had assumed the responsibilities of a battered old man, because youth, officious and eager, is over ready to be doing, but Bell dimly perceived that the objective life is not the only life, and that the soul, disdainful of the subterfuges of sense and flesh, proclaims the truth.

As the problem grew clearer to her she pitied Ralph anew that he should bear so much so vainly ; but she did not yet see that to mend one false position she contemplated the creation of another ; thinking to make up for his sacrifice by her own. So in generous ignorance she stamped on the smouldering ashes of her sweet, fresh love for Guy.

Evidently he had left the neighbourhood. She was glad of that ; it gave her time to adjust herself to her new rôle. At first she dreaded meeting him on her rambles ; each knock at the door made her heart leap ; but as days passed and he did not come, she went out boldly in new courage with the grey-haired old man leaning upon her arm, scolding or caressing, as his mood might be.

The chill atmosphere invigorated her, for if she

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could not get to the soul of things, she ever bounded to the call of nature, and the strength of the winter forces at work challenged her to endurance, her physical well-being stood her in good stead.

It happened that one night Arthur Searell was so ill that it became impossible to hide the fact. At midnight the Doctor, who was called away professionally, left his patient in the care of the brother and sister, first administering an opiate. This intermittent fever worried the Doctor; he was baffled as to its immediate cause. As a man Arthur Searell was worthless in his eyes, but life was precious to the physician, and a triumph of science over disease, a triumph worth the striving for. The man's nervous system was a hopeless wreck, but after the treatment and careful nursing he had received the Doctor expected better conditions generally.

If he had remained through the night he would have received some important information bearing upon the case.

Walter insisted upon Bell's retiring to rest—she looked tired. With ill-concealed agitation the girl persisted that she was never tired, turning her pale, pleading face to her brother wistfully. Something in her manner appealed to Walter strangely; this was not the little sister who had expressed every passing emotion so emphatically, nor was

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she the same girl who for a few brief days after her return had been so full of projects for the future. Was that, which was a vague fear to him, a certainty to her? If so, how brave and patient she must be! He bade her good-night with unusual tenderness. She clung to him as though his caress had touched a need of sympathy, and when she had gone, he felt her tears wet upon his face.

A rush of heartfelt emotion prompted him to go after her; he limped quickly to the door, questions that had been eating his heart out rushing to his lips, but he was arrested by a hoarse whisper from the bed. His father's eyes were wide open and staring; he was looking past him at the phantoms of his own brain, and while Walter gazed, half in fearful fascination and half in resentful shame, the old man babbled with sinister exultation of how he had recovered his beautiful gold.

The next morning shone with a sunshine that seemed the herald of spring, and feeling a pulse of reviving life in his sluggish veins, Arthur Searrell rose, and, taking his staff, went out. He turned his steps along the well-known path to the school. His progress was slow, and he stopped frequently to gaze at old points of interest on the road. What memories stirred in his sluggish brain were not traceable in the grey, worn face; he appeared to feel an animal enjoyment in the warmth of the sunbeams, and clasping his stick between his shak-

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ing knees, occasionally spread out his hands to the glow. As though guided more by instinct than by perception, he came at last to the school-house. The hum of voices like busy bees in their hive came through the open windows ; his brows contracted with his old dislike ; then, pausing for a moment, he felt by the wall, pushed the door open with a lean, trembling hand, and went in.

Walter, looking stern and pale, was addressing the school on some matter of discipline. When Arthur Searell caught sight of his son, he half wavered in his intention of going forward. The momentary inattention of his pupils drew the young schoolmaster's eyes to where the glance of the boys had wandered. He stopped short and flushed, as though in indecision, when he saw his visitor.

"I came to see the boys," the old man quavered, stretching forth his hand.

With the civility he would have shown a stranger, Walter handed him a chair. For a moment the young man seemed undecided what next to do ; the line of perplexity deepened between his brows, his lips quivered, he seemed oppressed with painful thought ; then raised his head, his clear glance taking in the rows of expectant faces lifted to his own. He took up the thread of his address, and spoke with a fervour that held the school in awe. A boy—the culprit stood on the floor before the

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master's desk—had been detected in theft and lying. Whatever the old man had come to see and hear, he had not expected to listen to the torrent of indignant scorn for treachery that made tingle the most innocent ears there present.

"There is only one thing left for you," concluded Walter—"to make atonement."

He was tingling with shame and misery, poor boy, and his words had been hard. He stood quivering with humiliation, betraying his pain in every tone and movement.

In the silence that had fallen after his son's hot words, Arthur Searell rose from his seat slowly and stood beside him. His white face worked spasmodically; he steadied himself on his stick with a great effort.

"I was master of this school once," he said, in a slow, meaning tone that each scholar distinctly heard. "I was sometimes narrow and sometimes hard. I did one boy an injury." He paused significantly. "I should like to be remembered for one kindly deed in these old walls."

He lifted his head and looked pleadingly into Walter's eyes, with a glance in which was no delirium. "Will you pardon this boy in—an—old—man's—name?"

The school held its breath, an electric thrill passed magnetically to its centre. Walter turned white to the lips.

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"No," he replied, in hard, clear tones; "not till he has restored fourfold."

The old man shivered, his chin fell upon his breast, and in a silence that could be heard he crept slowly to the door.

Late in the afternoon, long after the shouts of the boys had died away in the distance, the thud of the schoolmaster's crutch was heard on the school-room floor. Had he done right? he asked himself in an agony, had he checked a confidence that might have turned to him? Would the Master have done so? There was no pardon before repentance, no repentance without a turning from evil. He would go to him and plead with him, and so when the grey twilight fell he went.

CHAPTER XX

SILENCE BROKEN

WALTER turned the handle of the door, paused on the threshold of the sitting-room, and entered.

Arthur Searell sat in his old chair by the fire, his hands resting upon its arms, his eyes staring into the glowing embers. He turned his head when Walter entered, half rose from his chair, then sank back helplessly, made a great effort to gather himself together, and assumed an air of dignified affront.

Walter came close to the chair, and leaning heavily upon his crutch, looked down at the trembling old man with an expression not to be defined—sympathy, shame, contrition, pleading shone from the clear grey eyes. His voice faltered with suppressed feeling.

"Father," he said, then paused—it was hard to uncover his father's nakedness; but he went on appealingly—"you are in trouble; can I serve you? This morning you asked a favour which I refused. I have been fighting battles since then. I ask your pardon; you have been ill——"

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"I *have* been ill!" replied the man in the snivelling tone which always annoyed his son.

Walter's brows contracted slightly at the tone, but he recovered himself almost instantly.

"And during that illness you lost your memory," he said eagerly.

"I lost my memory!" repeated the old man vaguely, lifting his eyes wearily. They were caught and held by the steady gaze that seemed to search his soul, and to tear away every rag of pretence. The moment that he could, he looked away.

"But you remember now—I saw that in the school this morning—and memory means freedom for you; it is the way out of this trouble. There *is no* palliation of it, no bettering of the position as it stands." His face flushed hotly; he plunged from riddles into plain speech. "Tell me," he implored—"tell me. I will try to be as kind as the Christ Whose mercy is as wide as the horizon. I have seemed hard—I will be gentle; I have held myself aloof. Father, my days shall be spent in effort for you, if only you will take your own shame upon your own shoulders; the undoing of the wrong done in your confusion of mind is your prerogative."

In his earnestness Walter's fingers closed on his father's with a grip; he would drag the confession from him.

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"I don't know what you mean!" the old man replied, turning a defiant glance upon his son.

Walter dropped the hand he had grasped ; his old disgust swept over him in full tide, carrying away with it the spiritual glow that had suffused his countenance. An impulse of aversion made him, for a moment, cold. Walter pierced his assumption of innocence with a look that made Arthur Searell quail.

"Lay down your pretence," Walter resumed coldly ; "let us, for once at least, stand revealed to one another. You know what I mean. I have no right to speak to you like this, you may think. You are my father"—the coldness of tone changed to accents of pain—"but you are dazed and confused, and I dare venture, at the risk of wounding you, to assail your deadening dumbness with hot words in the name of truth and justice."

The old man's grasp tightened on the chair, but he made no answer ; fixed rigidity hardened his face. Walter looked in despair for further sign of comprehension. Was the old man past realisation of the position, or was this immobility a barrier he consciously set up between them ? He was baffled ; he looked at the drawn face, upon which the imprint of fear showed consciousness ; then, in a tone of tender charity, his voice breaking and catching every now and then, as though

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he found it hard, poor lad, to keep from crying, he persisted :

“ Can't we end the dumb conflict that has so long gone on between us ? Begin where we left off, when my mother died. Give me back my boyhood, dear father, and the gratification of obedience. It has been awful—it is awful, this choice between you and—God pity us !—principle. Rule by the indisputable right of manhood dominant over weakness.” He bent forward, laid his crutch quietly on the ground, and kneeling to bring his face on a level with the averted face, went on : “ The pain of your desertion, father, froze sweetness in me. It kept me too ashamed to aspire. Come back to me in this hour.” He choked, then bowed his head on his father's hand, quick, hot tears wetting the trembling fingers. “ Do what you will with me henceforth, I am yours to serve, but trust me now. Poor, helpless soul, unmask ; let us put right this intolerable wrong. Grasp your moment of heroism ; the losing of your honour will be to gain it, the shame to your children will be their honour ! Do not in weak grasping for legal liberty miss your opportunity for justice ! You are imposing upon yourself bonds and chains heavier to bear than you conceive ; you are shutting yourself in a darkness greater than that of a prison cell.”

Arthur Searell shook off the clinging hands of his son, and stood up.

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"Where's Bell?" he asked, in genuine alarm.

Walter rose to his feet, all pleading banished from face and voice.

"Bell's indulgence of you is an impiety!" he exclaimed, moving to intercept his father's intention of escape. "Bell cannot shield you from yourself and fulfil God's law for you. You have stripped others all your life, strip yourself and restore!"

The old man lifted up his hands as though to ward off a blow. Walter's eyes blazed with righteous indignation and the pain of being cast back upon himself.

"You *must* renounce your cowardice and confess your crime!" he went on relentlessly, clutching his father's arm. "No one can carry you into strength and freedom."

The old man interrupted with a wailing cry, and, getting free of the detaining hand, he drew himself up.

"Denounce me!" he almost screamed—"denounce me; make your charge; hand me over to justice; make your sister an outcast!"

"No," answered Walter, meeting without flinching the malignant glance of the burning eyes; "my action would benefit you nothing; true freedom comes from within. Be not deceived, its impulse in your soul will push and push and hurt you more than chains. No man can sin comfortably, nor

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can he sin unto himself ; and if this silence on your part is partly to shield Bell from the consequences of your act, it can't be done. You have mocked us all—taken, without compunction, the sacrifice of more than one life—but you can't mock God ! No man can remove his neighbour's landmark without losing his own way."

Arthur Searell went back to his chair and fell again into his old attitude. Walter bent his eyes upon him mournfully, then turned and went out without another word, battling with himself for mastery of his emotion.

A sense of failure struck a chill to his heart. This blindness and deafness, this spiritual paralysis of his father, gave the lad more anguish than did the old man's physical ills. Death of the body meant little, death of the soul——? Their respectability in the eyes of the world weighed with him not a jot. It was a humbling moment when he realised how little he could move his father. His aspirations and resolutions seemed bedraggled and soiled ; he lacked, he told himself, some essential of his Master ; his hatred of wrongdoing made him austere. The boy in school this morning had given him looks of fear ; and Bell, who drew every—living thing to her and won confidence in an hour, had herself kept this secret from him.

He went slowly along the path to the river. The air was mild and fragrant with the smell of

SILENCE BROKEN

earth and water. The cliff sides, the river, and the "silverleaf" foliage caught the light of the after-glow in the sky, and shone in steely patches here and there amid the surrounding gloom of peak and forest.

He caught sight of a moving figure beside the stream. Bell turned at the thud of her brother's crutch crossing the bridge, and came forward to meet him. Even in the twilight Walter noted anew the dignity of carriage and step. The light tripping grace had departed and left behind a something more self-poised. Walter missed the old spontaneous bound towards him, yet to-night, as she came slowly on, a nearer scrutiny discovered agitation in her movement. She bent forward apprehensively.

Walter did not speak immediately ; he took Bell's hand, which felt soft and small, in one of his, and they went on slowly to the little landing-place where the old boat was still moored, half sunken and broken. The water lapped about it and against the boulder where they seated themselves ; old memories crowded thick and fast ; and both minds, travelling the same way, met at the old point of bygone comradeship.

"Isobel," said Walter at last, in a choking voice, and resting his hand upon her knee, "why have you hidden this thing from me? How have I made you afraid of me, that you have withheld

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your confidence ? I cannot bear it. Are our relations as children never to be renewed ? are we forever to be strangers ?”

Bell drew her breath spasmodically when he began to speak ; it had come to pass what she was always fearing.

“ Ah ! you know !” she exclaimed in a low tone. “ Last night—I understand—he talked. I have kept silence, not out of fear of you, but fear for you. He has wasted everything, spoilt everything, disgraced you beyond remedy.”

There was a moment’s revolt and bitterness in her voice. Walter was startled into a new gladness by her tone ; it soothed the sore place in his heart ; it was love, then, not aversion that had held her silent ! He bent forward eagerly to scan her face ; there was a tumult in his own that spoke of the pent-up emotion that might, in a broader life, have found its outlet.

“ It was to save me suffering, then,” he said gently. “ Do you think I have not your courage and fortitude, that I should shrink back from what you take so calmly ? Try me ; tell me all.”

He listened quietly while she poured out all there was to tell. The river tumbling at their feet played its old accompaniment to their confidence. Walter did not interrupt, he let her finish before he spoke ; then he asked :

SILENCE BROKEN

"But don't you see the wrong to Ralph—to yourself—the shame in all this?"

He offered her no consolation.

"Don't you see how futile also? God demands atonement from the one in error; taking fellowship with weakness is not the plan of salvation."

"I have never thought of religion as a relentless grasp upon life, holding one captive," she replied. "God's love has seemed to me not to depend upon our attainments."

"No, it demands them," said Walter.

"It is difficult," proceeded Bell, "to know what *is* good and what evil, or whether it can be said of any that he is good or evil. Our father is a sick man, mentally feeble. Don't you see he cannot comprehend you? That he listens to remonstrance, only like a frightened child? Can't you feel towards him as such?"

"*The soul that sinneth it shall die*—and his is dying. Oh, Bell," went on Walter eagerly, "won't you help me to give him new life; to get rid of this sin? Neither you nor Ralph can bear it for him. '*The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son.*' Our father is capable of independent action. '*Thou shalt not*' is still a law to him. The original cause of his mental infirmity was the violation of that law. It is the state of his mind that has enfeebled his body."

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"One cannot deal by him as by one wholly sane," said Bell, in a tone that matched her brother's for conviction.

"Fear is driving him mad," affirmed Walter.

"Say rather that madness makes him afraid," responded Bell; "but mad or sane, he is our father, in the break-down of a feeble old age, and I cannot view his position through religious ecstasy; I see only the human aspect of it. He sinned against the law—another man, stronger and braver than he, pays the debt."

"And you, out of the sweetness of your human pity, offer him the recompense of your life," said Walter, standing up in agitation, and moving a step away; "two lives are bereft to prop our father's cowardice. It is false reasoning—sophistry. It will all tumble to pieces."

And because Bell feared it, she tried to persuade herself that it could not be.

"Only one motive has been mine through all this, to spare others what pain I could," she said humbly. Her tone of wistfulness and defeat brought her brother back to her.

"Child," he said gravely, resting his hand upon her shoulder, "how afraid you are of letting people be hurt. You want a little of the surgeon's courage. Hurting means healing oftener than death."

"Well," said Bell, rising wearily and linking her arm through her brother's, "I am ignorant.

SILENCE BROKEN

I have no creed except to love, and no weapon of defence against evil save, perhaps, patience. I can't draw the line, as I told you just now, between good and evil. I have seen bad men do brave deeds and religious men act the coward, even to the shrinking from death. Jim Morton was a bad man, but he was not afraid to die. I think God is friends with many people you wouldn't care to know."

She said it simply and as a matter of fact, not in a controversial spirit.

They walked in silence up the wild, uninhabited glen, so rich in memory and the voice of nature, and crossed the bridge and commenced the zigzag path ; and only when the cottage window glowed through the trees did Walter speak.

"Give me your idea of a man after God's own heart," he asked.

"A man who does his level best, even if it isn't so good as another man's level worst," she answered.

This view of theology gave Walter's Puritan sense a shock ; a flavor of the camp clung to his sister's words.

When she lifted her face to be kissed good-night, she said : "Some way will be opened up."

A figure joined the brother and sister ; it was the Doctor ; he had just left the cottage.

"Now, there you're wrong !" he called out in

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tones of conviction. "I don't know in the least to what you allude ; I don't want to know, but whatever it is, you're wrong. The days of Moses and the Red Sea are dead ; ways don't 'open up' now ; they have to be made with hammer and pick. Go in, little woman, and eat."

"Well ?" queried the Doctor, when they were nearly home and Walter had not spoken. He laid his hand on the lad's shoulder.

"I've nothing to tell you, only a question to ask."

"Ask it."

"Is my father responsible for his actions—is he mad ?"

"No. I consulted with a trained specialist while we were in Auckland, and he held my opinion ; he would not go so far as to pronounce Arthur Searell insane ; there is serious nervous disorder, but with care he may recover. I don't say that he will—in fact, I don't think it, but he may."

"Then he may be saved !" Walter exclaimed involuntarily.

"My dear boy," responded the Doctor promptly, "if you are fretting your heart out to save your father's soul and make a noble man of him, I can assure you, in the words of Dr. Holmes, that the patient may almost always be saved if the doctor is called in time ; but he should be called two or three hundred years before the patient is born !

SILENCE BROKEN

Give it up. You are better employed translating tracts into Maori ; you have got a brave, healthy mission-field there."

" Then my father is not responsible, you hold ?"

" In his present condition the law would hold him so if he were to commit a crime, say, but I should not ; there is too close a relationship between nervous disorder and crime. What the Almighty would do the Almighty knows. That's neither your responsibility nor mine."

CHAPTER XXI

TWILIGHT

OCTOBER had waved its wand of sunshine over field and hill, waterfall and stream ; scent and sound wooed youth to passion and age to peace. Mating birds told in sweet trills the story that has been reiterated in every spring of nature and humanity since God said, " Let there be light."

Afternoon was merging into evening, that hour of all when loneliness makes itself most felt. Bell was walking homewards from the Doctor's, the stir of spring in her blood, and the ache of its repression at her heart. She had left the rise of the road behind her in the glow of the sunset, and moving between the shadows of cliff and tree, faced the crescent moon, that hung over the valley in which the cottage was situated. In the pale light her face looked calm. It wore the tense look of self-control and purpose ; her lips were drooping and sad, and her eyes looked far off with that expression of unsatisfied desire that is seen in the eyes of poets. She held her head proudly, every curve of the graceful figure was emphasised by the

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nun-like simplicity of her grey gown ; her abundant hair would not be wholly tamed, and escaped from the bronze coils that lay on the milk-white neck in wayward little curls.

The fitful stirring of the leaves, the gurgling of hidden rills were the only sounds upon the way until quick, eager, confident footsteps bounding to overtake, made Bell's heart leap. She half stopped, went on with increasing speed, flushed rosy red as the western sky, then paled. Her sun of delight and hope had risen and set before Guy's voice sounded in her ears : " At last ! "

The tone and words were those of one who, after long watching, sees the shore of home. He went on eagerly to tell of disappointment and delay, of banishment by the government into solitudes far away, of work that could not be refused and might not be hurried, of anxiety, of sympathy in her trouble, of impatience to get to her side, and then again there came that glad :

" At last ! "

Bell's heart swelled the while she listened. How strong and vigorous he was—again he put her into touch with the spring ; but she did not answer his smile with her old candour, there was a touch of her brother's austerity in her face, and, as she turned her eyes to Guy's with denial in their glance, she saw a shadow pass over his, like that on a clear pool when a cloud goes across the sun.

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His voice grew humbler, a note of pleading in his tones. He would have refused to go, he said, but a man should respond promptly to the call of his work—and a new ambition had made him eager. Men must work, she knew that—men must work.

Yes, she knew that.

Work was loyalty, if women only knew it. A man served a woman so. It was a service of muscle and sinew, a sort of worship of the body; he couldn't put quite clearly what he meant, but didn't she think that the material monuments men raised in commerce, in politics, in the professions, in art, in the crafts of the artisan, were, as often as not, the witness to woman's power? They had their spiritual as well as their material significance. The heroisms of war, of the ocean, of the poor drudge at the desk—didn't she think that these were tributes—say, at least five times out of ten, to woman's influence?

Yes, she thought it possible—in fact, she knew it was, she answered.

He searched her face for the going out of her mind to him. It was white, set, hard.

He rebelled against the fear that was creeping over him. She walked on irresponsive at his side, one small hand hanging down almost touching him. An impulse to take it seized him, but he was afraid; he struggled against it, and to get

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away from temptation, stooped down to gather a cluster of violets growing on a bank. Had not some poet said that a man should gather violets only for the woman he loved, because he must kneel to do it? He offered them with a flush that dyed his sun-browned face and neck. The rich colour reflected itself in Bell's soft cheeks. Their eyes met; his meaning could not be mistaken. Would she not take them, they were the first violets he had ever knelt to pluck? Then, seeing that her face grew pale again, he added hastily that they were her favourite colour; he remembered the dress she had worn on the cliffs that evening when she had come upon him like a vision and then had vanished; that since that time he had seen that particular shade of purple—violet was it?—whichever way he turned; on the mountains, just where the blue merged into the snow; in the vapours of the sunset; where the pools were deep and still; somehow it always seemed as though she were near.

She took the violets, and their fingers touched. She hastily fastened the flowers in her belt, he watching her the while. She drew herself up.

"Now you must go," she said, looking at him defiantly.

A look of blank dismay came over his face.

"Go!" he exclaimed. "I have only just found you. Is our friendship to be made up of partings?"

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Some words she had read came into her mind ; instead of answering his demand, she repeated them to herself mechanically :

“ Where the roads crossed we met,
My love and I.
In the near bay the ships
Tossed heavily. . . .
His was the seaward way,
Mine led me home.”

The last words recalled her.

“ I do not think it at all probable that we shall meet often,” she said with an effort, holding out her hand as if in dismissal.

Guy did not take the hand. How had she changed, he wondered. The frank ingenuousness of look and speech had gone. Expression, colour, the brightness of life—all had been subdued. She looked up at him and smiled sadly.

“ But you said that I might come,” he protested. She laughed hysterically.

“ That was in the autumn,” she said. “ There are no birds in last year’s nests.”

Her laugh sounded strangely in her own ears. She wondered why she laughed. She had grown very pale, and Guy’s ruddy colour had faded.

“ Perhaps I seemed to mock you. I ought not to have gone,” he said hurriedly. “ You can laugh lightly”—he flushed and bit his lip—“ if you were in sport I am defenceless. You’d not

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believe by how many roads my thoughts travelled to you before my feet overtook you upon this."

A silence fell between them. He walked slowly beside her, hurt and humiliated. Then something happened that made his heart leap. He saw the little hand lying on his sleeve as it had rested at Miners' Alley. Hope ran rampant in his veins. He would have covered the hand with his own, but something in Bell's face checked him.

"I don't know why I laughed," she said. "I am not merry ; forgive me. But we may not meet. I cannot even offer the common hospitality of a New Zealand house. Indeed," she added bitterly, "you would not accept it if you knew everything."

They stood now where the cottage was visible in the glen, its red-curtained windows glowing among the trees.

"Since the autumn there has been a great change ; nothing stands as it did that evening when I said that you might come. The memory of your coming will help me. I thank you. Yes," she resumed, "yes, I may say that, although I cannot explain to you why. This is not a girl's caprice ; there is no choice—you must go."

She was not coquetting, he saw that ; she was not making him the target of her sport.

The glamour that his farm-wife friend had

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spoken of had cast its spell of mist upon the road. Guy could not see the rocks ; he would go on.

" But I can't let you go like this," he urged, and he held her hand now, " perhaps never to see you any more. I have no right, no claim, nothing to urge, except—" his longing eyes told what his impetuous tongue, tripped up by fear of her displeasure, ran to tell. " You cut the ground from under my feet ; you do not leave me an inch to stand on," he concluded.

Bell looked away from him, over at the crescent moon. The early twilight was deepening, and while they stood together in the silence, the weird call of the mop-poke brought back to Bell's memory the huge valley far away, dotted with miners' huts ; with a rush came recollections of hopes and aspirations all laid waste. Existence, as it was, as it would be, became at that moment intolerable. Guy, observant of every expression of her face, watched melancholy give place to fear, fear to defiance, and then, unexpectedly, she softened. Cheeks, eyes, lips regained their old brilliancy of life and colour.

" If I give you one day—unlink it from my life, sever it from its duties—will you go away at the end of it and leave me free ?" she asked hurriedly. " Understand, it will be a day in a life ; without pledge, responsibility, sequence, and at its end we part."

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"It will be a life in a day," he responded eagerly.

"Very well, then ; from sunrise till sundown to-morrow. Meet me on the cliffs."

CHAPTER XXII

A LIFE IN A DAY

THE birds were scarcely astir next morning when Bell arose. In the white light of the dawn, white robed, she flitted, under cover of thick foliage, to her bathing pool ; then stepped forth fresh and radiant, and ran back breathlessly to her room to dress for this day of days. The daring of the gambler, the faith of innocence, the courage of young passion were having their way ; she emerged from the grey twilight of repression and duty into the light and space of freedom—a stolen freedom, but freedom still. For one day, only one day, she would be Bell, neither Bell the criminal's daughter, nor Bell who was pledged to Ralph—just her own self as she had been made, for joy and love. Surely, she thought, God would not grudge her just one day—the God who put the birds on the wing and gave the fishes fins, and made the moving, shifting mass of insect life. A butterfly asked no less than she—one day in the sun. To-morrow she would take up the cross again—braver, better, stronger for the rest. Besides, was there no claim

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for self—had *she* no right? One day was a very little while for happiness and love; she would free it from the network and tangle of sadness that had closed about her years, then drop it into the sea; the waves of time would close over it, and no one, but she and Guy and God, would know that it had ever been. The dear thought that Guy loved her, that he had sought her and wooed her with eyes and voice, caused the pink of tingling blood to steal over her cheeks.

She brought from a recess a gown of violet, of silky muslin, dainty and fresh as a flower. She took a glance at the lightening sky; it gave assurance of a perfect day; she might wear her gown with safety. She wondered whether girls felt as she felt when dressing for their bridal! She supposed they might. She had nothing to go upon—if her mother. . . . The thought was too big, she could not fill it in; but she came back to her old refrain:

“If my mother had lived she would have told me.”

Like a bride adorning for her husband, she donned dainty, lace-edged garments. They had been among the purchases she had made in Auckland when, in the happy home-coming, she prepared for “that good time” which nothing had promised except her youth, no one had prophesied except her own heart. And it was come! It was

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to-day ! She buried her cheeks in the soft folds of her violet gown. A rush of thankfulness swept over her, she had been so near to missing it—her day. Perhaps there were many girls who never had even one day of happiness.

When she was dressed, she looked at herself and smiled. Loose ruffles fell away from the round white arms and throat ; upon her bronze head a broad-brimmed hat of violets rested, two long strings hanging untied from the brim. A violet ribbon, fastened with a silver clasp, encircled her waist ; her arched feet were shod in strapped shoes, and silk stockings, the same colour as her dress, were visible between the straps. She looked at her reflection and smiled, in sheer content that she was so fair. That is a woman's way ; she takes her beauty to the man she loves, as the gift God put into her hands to best delight him.

When she entered the sitting-room, she left a note for her father where he could see it.

" I have taken a day from my life for myself. All the past has been yours. This evening, when the sun sets, I shall come back to you again—and stay.

" BELL."

Pale saffron had spread over the eastern sky, the tops of the cliffs were brightening ; the valley itself

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was still in shadow, but luminous shadow ; bird and insect were awaking. A subdued bustle, an intoxicating expectancy magnetised the twilight of the morning.

Bell went quickly towards the stream, one hand gathering her dainty skirts from the dew-damp grass, the other resting lightly on the violets at her breast, violets Guy had knelt to pluck. When she came to the bridge she stopped in the centre and looked down into the limpid depths, to catch a glimpse of that violet he had spoken of ; and she smiled at the sweet conceit of her presence reflected far off on a craggy height.

Before she had climbed half way to the summit, she heard Guy descending the cliff, crunching the undergrowth beneath hurrying feet, his resonant voice sounding fresh on the morning breeze :

“ From all the misty morning air,
There comes a Summer sound,
A murmur as of water comes,
From skies, and trees, and ground.
The birds they sing upon the wing,
The pigeons bill and coo——”

He came into sight, advancing with the proud, swinging step peculiarly his own. He flushed, snatched off his cap, and strode to her side, his eyes aglow. For a moment he stood before her bareheaded, rejoicing in her beauty. He took her hand, as though he claimed his own, and in a

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silence that she understood, he led her up the path, his cap still in one hand.

They reached the topmost ridge. The sky was aflame. Guy's strong fingers tightened on the hand he held.

"Sunrise!" he said; then turned and looked into the girl's face, flushed with the dawn.

"I love you, dear," he said, and kissed her.

The colour mounted to her neck and face, then left her paler than before. But she made no protest.

"I have not offended you?" he went on solicitously, for her expression mystified him. "If so, forgive me, Bell. But at sight of you, my heart is so filled with joy and gladness that I could not help it—any more than I could crush my love. Say, sweet, I have not offended you," he repeated.

"You have not offended me," she said softly; but there was a note of sadness in her tone that checked the ardour of her lover. Then, feeling that her manner caused him disquiet, she roused herself and continued cheerfully, "But tell me, what you have been doing since we parted."

He had risen, he told her, when the clock struck one—when a man has only one day, there are no hours to waste; he had slept at a farm on the downs, the same farm at which she had rested when a child.

Yes, she said, she remembered the woman was a comely, kind creature, who had fed her.

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She had fed them both to-day, Guy continued ; she had packed a " kit " with dainties, and he had prepared breakfast. The " billy " boiled, and he made tea. He made a nest for Bell among the fresh heather, telling her she must sit still and be waited upon. To-morrow she would be free, to-day she must obey.

He had come back to the same point again. Rebellion looked out of his eyes, then he tamed, and sat down at her feet and wondered why she could lightly laugh ; then laughed himself, and said he was a fool.

He could not at once rise to the sacrifice she asked. The instinct of domination rose in him. As her beauty and sweetness stirred his blood, the desire of possession rose. He would not resign her without a struggle. He drew nearer to her feet, and took the hand that lay upon the bracken.

" How sweet you are, and yet how stern ! How confiding, and yet how far off ! When the sun rises to-morrow I shall be away. *Must* I go ? Go away in the dark, blindly, and not know why ; not know what is to be your lot ? No, I cannot—I will not leave you ! "

" Remember your bond ; for you I exist only for to-day. "

" But you can cancel the bond ; and for me you will exist forever. Oh, Bell, relent ! There is no dishonour in pleading for release from such a

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promise, and I must be either more or less than man to fail to sue for it. I cannot part from you."

She looked up for a moment into his face, then her eyes fell ; she could not meet the hungry passion in his gaze.

" You make me sorry when you talk like that," she said. " After to-day we part."

There was a sob in her voice, and he detected it.

" Dear, there are tears in your eyes."

" No," she answered with forced cheerfulness ; " it is the light of the sun. I weeping to-day ? No."

" Put me to some other test," he pleaded. " Set me any hard task ; I will bear anything, except parting."

" Parting is all I ask you to bear."

" Ah !" he said eagerly, holding her hands against his breast ; " you want to prove me."

" No, it is no test. To-day is all."

" Morning and noon and afternoon—and then night."

" But the day is to live through yet," she said with infinite gentleness ; " to-day we are together, and not till twilight should we sorrow. See how glad the world is."

" True," he responded, striving to bring himself into harmony with her mood. He held out his hand.

" Come, dear."

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The bell-birds and the larks were up, and in the pauses of their music strange sweet calls of native birds sounded from the bush ; soft, brownny rabbits scurried away at the approach of the man and the woman who, hand-in-hand, went down the deep descent on the other side of the cliff.

"Which way shall we take, the low-lying land or the hills?" asked Guy when they had reached a ravine with a stream at the bottom bordered with flax. The flax reminded Bell of Miners' Alley.

"I do not care—over the hills or where—anywhere. To the right, or left, or straight on."

She spoke bitterly. Guy gazed upon her for a moment questioninglly. Her eyes were sparkling and her cheeks flushed, but whether from the pure morning air or with excitement, he could not tell.

"I will choose the way for you. It shall be an omen."

He bent down and kissed her ; she placed her hand in his, as though obeying some strange impulse ; she scarcely looked ahead ; it didn't signify which way they went, the journey would end at sundown ; but Guy scanned the prospect eagerly with a practised eye, his clear-cut features animated with a boyish hope of somehow reaching a sphere of transcendent good. But as they went on Guy forgot his rôle of guide, and caught the

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spirit of Bell's mood. Sometimes he followed her—which is a man's way when a woman steps firm—as she ran lightly on hazardous errands. There was an elasticity in the air, a mingled odour of tussock grass and gorse that helped them to forget past and future. Beauty quickens the susceptibilities, and sense helps the soul ; and Guy and Bell felt like a new-born man and woman who had discovered one another and a new world. Nothing clamoured for answer. There was just that one day, sunny, sweet-scented, beautiful.

Once Guy ran after a butterfly, trying to imprison it with his cap, but Bell called out after him to let it go free ; and when he loitered to gather some little blue flowers in the grass, she stayed his hand. They must hurt nothing that day, she said. Then they strolled on and told one another stories of men and women who had fought and conquered. Old tales that everybody knew, but that took fresh meaning from the scene.

They came at last to a valley guarded by stupendous cliffs ; a small stream trickled through the brushwood, chattering child of a merry waterfall dancing down the cliff. Here they halted to quench their thirst and eat the sandwiches and fruit Guy carried.

Remembrance came. Guy looked up at the sun. " It is noon, Bell."

" So soon ?"

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"Would that I were Joshua and could command the sun to stand still!" exclaimed Guy.

They ate their lunch almost in silence, while little birds—scarcely bigger than a humming-bird—haunted the stream at their feet, sticking their long narrow tails straight up, or wagging them about in the most conceited manner. A glossy black crow swept down, but seeing no chance of enchaining Bell's bright eyes, with a loud caw-caa-ca-a-ah, flew over the dark cliffs whence came the faint bleating of lambs.

All the lights and shades of the day blended together to make a perfect picture: close at hand the silver fall trickled down the reddish-brown rock; further away a mass of white clematis touched the tops of green-black native bush like a light fall of snow. A scarlet blossom flamed among the rushes beside the white foam of the burn, and the two alone among the streams and mountains looked on in drowsy content, in unconventional remoteness from the criticism of cities. "We are happy," she said, turning to look at him.

He nodded, then asked her what she meant. The day had given him glimpses of a woman his manhood craved. She drew herself a little away from him.

"In the first place we shall never die to each other," she went on; "we shall live always in the

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sunshine, young and strong. We shall never wear each other's patience ; you will never look upon my wrinkled face searching your memory for my youth, when I need your kindness most, nor will either sit beside a lonely hearth and watch with faded eyes an empty chair."

" But think what we shall miss !"

She shook her head.

His voice quivered a little while he went on :
" If we were together, you and I, we could defy old age and sorrow."

" That is not true," she said sadly ; " they are inevitable. But I am content—I *know* that good is not only to have, but to feel also. When I was quite a child my brother, after remonstrating with me in vain for seeking pleasure where he found none, carried me on his back to the cliff top—where we saw the sun rise this morning—to watch for the moon, thinking it the door of heaven. And it rose, oh ! so far away."

Guy drew her nearer ; she spoke more sadly than before.

" My brother is a good man, but he would kill me calmly if he thought it for the benefit of my soul. He has no personal aims nor ambitions : all his desire is to carry souls to get a peep of heaven. But"—she laughed gently—" one can't go pick-a-back like that—I know better ; I have found my way—this is it !"

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"You sweet !" he said, and kissed her.

"And if you look," she proceeded, "every creature in nature knows where to find its water and its food. I think we are like that, too ; some natures find God where the air is keen, and some where the sun shines. The holly and the heather bloom brightest where it freezes."

"You are the rose !" he said, stopping her words with a kiss.

"I love the sunshine," she said, "and I want you to remember I found my strength in joy—in the joy of my love for you."

Her voice broke, and her soft eyes brimmed.

"I can't reason about my love," she went on presently, twisting round and round, while she spoke, one of the buttons of his coat ; "it seems to me that to analyse love would be to kill it—it should remain a mystery to itself. I shouldn't thank anybody who gave me the science of this summer day, and showed me the source of its colour under a microscope—it would destroy the charm. I don't know why I love you, and I don't want to know ; you are Guy—and I love you."

"You love me, and yet you say that we must part ? It must not be ! You say that you have found strength in the joy of your love for me, and yet you would deprive yourself of its support ! Is it wise, is it right ? And have you no thought for me ? Bell, I cannot live without you."

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"You make it hard for me when you speak thus," she said ; " but you cannot shake my resolution ; when to-day is gone we part."

She sprang lightly to her feet and moved onward.

" But why ? Why should we part ? You are incomprehensible to me," he said, following her closely. Her acceptance of the position wounded him. Now that their faces were turned homeward he regretted his bond. All the morning he had half expected an explanation ; but it was not Bell's plan to defend herself by the betrayal of her father. A storm of feeling swept him along.

" I am like the Shawnee woman," he said. " I have loved a phantom ; or like a man chasing his own shadow, which, run as he will, he cannot catch."

" Have I done harm ?" she asked, paling while she spoke. " Have I been to blame ? In taking my joy, have I hurt you ? It might be so ; we are like that ; we do what seems best to us, and forget that another might view our action in a different light. Be friends with me !"

He caught at her words eagerly, not understanding that she meant them as a sue for pardon.

" Friends, anything you like, so that we do not part !" he cried.

" Ah, no," she said, moved almost to tears ; " you misunderstand. Is this kind ? is it gener-

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ous of you ? nay, is it just ? We agreed last night it was to be for one day only, and that you would leave me free."

"I was a fool," he answered ; "I thought myself something more or something less than a man. I didn't know myself—and, besides, last night there was to-day to accept or refuse—I could not refuse it !"

She looked up at him startled.

"I thought you understood," she said tremulously, "that there could be no more than this. I am sorry. I can say no more, but that I am sorry. I thought you would be content."

All the brightness left her face. He put his arm round her.

"Forgive me," he said hoarsely ; "I am your debtor."

Ralph's face rose before Bell's vision ; she heard him saying : "A man loves a girl, or he doesn't love her. If he loves her, he's gone past wanting her for his friend, even his best friend."

"Dear," she said gently, "we met at the cross roads ; our ways diverge ; mine leads into the valley ; yours—oh yes, for you are a man and free, with your life in your hand—yours leads to the mountain-climb."

They emerged from the forest ; the hills cast long shadows, and the spot was desolate and lonely.

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"How early the shadows fall among the mountains," he said after a long silence, looking anxiously to the west. Then he bent his gaze on her. "Sweetheart, we have walked too far ; I feel you dragging."

He tucked her arm closer in his, and they went on silently again. At last he said, "Poor little feet—they limp a little."

"A little," she replied.

They reached the summit of the cliff, and stood, hand in hand, watching the sun go down. Then they turned and looked at one another with frightened eyes. He held out his arms and she nestled to him, he straining her to his breast.

"Are you inexorable, Bell ? Will nothing move you ?" he asked, his arms still folded round her. "How can you send me from you ? Oh, we must not be parted !"

Then his voice took on a more cheerful tone, and he went on : "And something seems to tell me that we shall not ; that, after a time, we shall meet again ; that our love is not doomed to wither almost at its birth, but to grow stronger, nourished in each by the close presence of the other. With this hope to cheer me I will be patient."

"If it helps you, dear," she said, "I will not seek to rob you of it ; but I know."

Her tone chilled his heart, it was so hopeless.

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"You are not crying, are you, Bell?" were his next words.

"No," she answered, drawing herself from his embrace. "Our roads part here, Guy."

"Good-bye, dear heart," he said, but held her close.

"Are you not afraid to go on alone?" he asked presently. "It is growing dusk."

"I am never afraid; besides, there are the stars."

"Ah, yes." His voice was troubled and uncertain.

"Good-night!" she said. "Good-bye!"

He heard her light footsteps go down the track. "Bell!" he called. There was silence for a space, then he heard the faintest echo of steps again upon the bridge; then these died and all was still.

CHAPTER XXIII

RALPH'S LIBERTY

BETWEEN the dark and the daylight one winter's afternoon, more than two years after Ralph's arrest, a white-haired old man was busy with a pick on the river's brink. He worked with a childish sort of eagerness, talking to himself between every stroke, standing off occasionally to admire the heaps of earth and stone he had piled about him like so many graves. He seemed to enjoy his work, and varied its monotony by frequent examinations of the earth heaps. It pleased him to name his imagined claims. One grave stood for Walter, another for Bell, and the largest and deepest for Ralph. From this he picked shining sand and little pieces of stone, commenting audibly the while : " A fine specimen ; a fortune here !" and gathering his supposed treasure into a pan, he went on tiptoe, and with many cautious pauses, down the bank to wash it in the river.

So Arthur Searell played, looking over his shoulder every few minutes, shading his eyes with his hand and peering through the gathering mists

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for the signal of his home-going—the lighted windows of the cottage. The problems which others had been seeking to unravel for him, the widening sorrow he had generated, had no meaning or heart-harrowing for him; amid his broken intellect one project only stood—the quest for gold.

The long, low-ceilinged sitting-room glowed with the light of the log fire that burned upon the hearth; the leather upholstery of the furniture caught the reflected flame at angles and corners, and the china and glass upon the old dresser glinted back dozens of small fires on miniature hearthstones.

Beside the hearth, where the glow of the fire was ruddiest, a mute figure sat in a huge arm-chair, propped among crimson cushions.

The figure was neatly dressed, scrupulously cared for; hair, hands, and the soft white flannel shirt were neat and clean.

The figure was Ralph.

His large eyes were staring vacantly into the fire. The log fell asunder, blazed up into flame which animated the still face with the red light of a transformation scene; then subsided to dull red and grey.

When the fire gleams withdrew from the motionless figure in the chair he seemed to change, to become rigid, cold, and grey, for the leaping

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flames had thrown a fictitious animation upon him —Ralph was a paralytic.

The deadly monotony of prison life exhausting his overtaxed nerves from almost the commencement of his incarceration, he had been unequal to the active outdoor labour of the prison, and he wore himself with heavy thought and yearning for companionship, for all that he persisted in his determination to see Bell no more till he had paid her father's debt.

"It won't do neither you nor me no good, my dear," was the message that he sent, so the girl struggled through the long days, more and more oppressed by her futility to lighten any portion of them for Ralph ; and when, at last, they brought him home, and her heart was filled with enthusiasm that her limitations were at an end, he was prematurely dead.

One day, when the time was drawing near for his discharge, a fellow-prisoner permitted himself pleasantries in connection with the memory of Jim Morton. At these the caged youth found outlet for an excess of pent-up feeling, in one of his paroxysms of passion. The outburst resulted in apoplexy, and paralysis followed.

The Doctor, alive to his finger-tips with the prospect of fresh battle with disease, conveyed him home ; and, while the tenacity with which Bell clung to her helpless friend was a fresh puzzle

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to the Doctor, he acquiesced in her proposal to constitute herself Ralph's nurse, for if "the self-existent and eternal mind" of his patient retained any dim consciousness, it was of the girl.

Bell opened the door from an inner apartment, and placing a lamp upon the wide window-sill, crossed the room to Ralph's chair. There was no intelligence in the dark eyes that followed her movements, but the drawn face partially relaxed. A subtle stimulus seemed to impart itself to the log-like helplessness of the inert body, through the magnetism of the presence which had never failed to register itself upon his pulse. His cramped, thin hands twitched and moved about aimlessly upon the rug that covered his knees, then mechanically plucked at the fur, as though he were picking oakum.

Bell sat at the feet once so swift in her service, shading her eyes with her hand, to shut off the sight of the self-imposed task of the restless fingers. Little tufts of fur fell over her bowed shoulders ; her beautiful eyes shone with her emotion.

"Don't, dear," she said appealingly, laying her hand upon the cramped fingers on the rug. "Don't ! You need not labour any more ; you are free, dear. I am not your gaoler !" she turned to the still face yearningly. The expressionless eyes looked steadily into hers. She gently put back the dark hair from the square forehead.

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"I am your nurse," she went on, falteringly. "I am Bell, and you are at home. Can't you remember me, Ralph? Can't you recollect the girl of your cherishing? I am pledged to you, dear. A life for a life."

The drawn face gave no sign of sense, the restless fingers plucked at the fur again, as though the soul prompted the inert body to work out her father's salvation even yet.

The outer door opened, and the grey old man, for whom the fingers toiled, came forward eagerly. His figure was more bent than before, but it had lost its tottering and weakness; forgetfulness had quenched the terror in his eyes. The man who had sinned, and the lad who had suffered, had alike forgotten. The old man put down the pick in the corner by the door; he wore the moleskins and shirt of the miner.

"Daddy," said Bell, in tones of gentle remonstrance, rising from her seat at Ralph's feet, then crossing to her father and removing his wide-awake hat, "you are late in coming in. You promised me to be home when the sun went down."

She stood near him in an attitude of authority, and he showed marked humility towards his young disciplinarian; with voice and glance he sued for favour.

"I shan't catch cold," he said, like an admonished child; "it isn't damp."

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Then he threw his clay-soiled arm about her shoulders, and, looking round the apartment as though fearful of eavesdroppers, he sunk his voice to a whisper :

" Bell, I've struck a patch—down by the river. I saw it gleam and gleam in the moonlight, ruddy red among the rock !" His eyes took on their old feverish expression. " Hush ! don't tell ; it's a secret ; we're rich, Bell, rich !" "

He resigned himself passively while Bell washed his hands ; then he ate his supper at her direction, his eyes travelling restlessly to the silent figure in the chair by the hearth, then back to Bell. He contracted his brows, as though perplexed ; then he said, " That's Ralph. Ralph won't tell ? "

" Ralph never tells ; Ralph is faithful to the death," answered Bell, with low, intense emphasis.

The old man broke out into a little gleeful laugh, and took the seat Bell had vacated at Ralph's feet.

" Ralph never tells !" he repeated in quavering accents ; " never, never tells ! "

The dull eyes looked down upon him without reproach ; doubt would not outrage.

" I've struck a patch," whispered the old man behind his hand ; " we'll go halves. You did something for me once—I forget what—it doesn't matter ! we'll go halves. That will put it all right. Shake hands ? "

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He put out his hand, half fearfully, and lifted the heavy one on the rug. Disturbed, the fingers plucked again at the fur.

The old man began to cry, and rocked himself backwards and forwards in the fashion Bell well remembered.

"He won't be friends," he complained; "he won't speak to me. I've offended him; I did something—I can't remember what—and he won't go halves."

Bell interrupted his complaining. It suggested the possibility of a half-conscious soul seeking with tears a place for repentance, and finding none. These outbursts of grief because Ralph would not be friends with him were of almost daily occurrence. He subsided now into sulky silence, aggrieved that Bell took sides against him, for she could not, for all her pity for her father, forsake Ralph. She leaned over him, and prayed God for his recovery, although the while she prayed her trust was in the Doctor's skill. She looked down tenderly into the pinched cold face, and drew the dark head to her bosom.

Arthur Searell rose in a storm of jealousy, for in his befogged brain Bell still stood as his sole possession, and Ralph seemed to rob him. Unconscious, unthinking, unplanning, Ralph was avenged. The old man stood up with all the dignity he could assume.

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"Good-night," he said ; " I am going to bed."

"Good-night, Daddy," replied Bell, but she did not remove her eyes from Ralph's face.

When the door had closed behind her father she resumed her seat at Ralph's feet, and sang to him softly that the cows were in the corn. The chord of memory thus touched vibrated to the theme of a sunrise and sunset on the cliff and a solitary figure left standing on the summit in the gloaming. A quick rap at the door startled the girl ; then, turning her head over her shoulder, she called, " Come in."

The door opened, a man's figure was silhouetted against the silver and grey of the landscape, a strong current of fresh night air puffed through the room.

Bell sprang to her feet, and, stretching out her hand, as though to ward off danger, gave a half-startled cry. She had extinguished the lamp placed in the window to guide her father home ; but in the dim light she recognised the straight knickerbockered form. The sensation of awakening, the rekindling of life in her blood, told her who had come. Her heart leaped to meet him, but she stood still.

" I have startled you," he said, with a gesture of deprecation, and in a voice trembling with eagerness to be heard. " I ask your pardon—"

Bell moved instinctively in front of Ralph, as

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though to shelter him from the intrusion, more and more conscious, through all her loyalty of action, of that keen reawakening. "How could you?" she asked coldly, fighting for self-restraint through the tumult of emotion his voice called up.

"I *had* to come. No, don't wave me off," he said, in his old, impetuous way.

"I have watched and waited for this opportunity. I have spied out your movements. I have made myself familiar with your surface life. I know your brother and your friends. I have used to the full the opportunities of a stranger." He went on bitterly: "I did go as you bade me. I followed my work wherever it led me; but that done, I have returned again and again, like a dog free from the chain. I have hung about for days in hiding—hiding I know not from what; it has been a blind misery! This morning you passed; you were beyond my reach, but the sight of you determined me—I am here."

His voice became dogged in its determination; the music and laughter of his tones were gone.

"I see the stamp of sorrow on the face I love," he continued, before Bell found voice to answer him; "and I am shut out from the cause. You came to me with smiles, treated me to the holiday of your pleasure; then mysteriously passed away. I am not strong enough to face banishment without knowing the cause; tortured by conjecture;

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certain of nothing, except that I have lost you. Bell, I charge you, by our love, to give me a nobler part than that of echo to your merry mood. Try me—give me your sorrow. Hurt me, if you like, but don't humiliate me by this silence."

"Do you think my part an easy one?" she asked, bowing her head upon her hands.

"No," he replied hoarsely, moving a step nearer, half putting out his hand to draw hers away from her face.

"No ; and because of that I did my utmost to submit, but I cannot grow within the limit you have assigned to me ; it is too narrow for the measure of a man. I have neither kith nor kin ; I *could* be son and brother ; I have never known the luxury of another human being to look to me for anything—save song. Give me sorrow to share with you, if you will—disgrace to bear, but *use* me !"

Bell still stood with covered face, his pleading voice tugging at her heart.

There was silence for a moment ; then Guy spoke again :

"If I had seen you happy I should have gone forever ; but, sweet, you are only trying to be. You are bowed beneath a burden too heavy for you. Can't you shift it on to me ? Bell, be merciful ; give me something tangible to cope with.

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Clear up this mystery, for God's sake. *What separates us ?*"

She moved away from Ralph's chair, and the figure seemed to loom through the twilight of the room. Guy's eyes, falling upon the grey face, were riveted. A cold sensation numbed him, his impetuous speech was checked. Bell went to the hearth and tended the logs ; they flickered into blaze again, and shed their illumination upon the room. Guy's pulse beat heavily. Ralph's soulless eyes rested upon his for a moment, as though indifferent to the passionate wooing of the girl he had loved ; then wandered off to Bell.

" He separates us," she said in distinct, low tones, laying her hand upon Ralph's shoulder with infinite gentleness. She was white to the lips, but resolute. Guy stood dumb as the figure he stared at ; he had heard of the paralytic at the farm, but " because things seen are harder than things heard," Guy was abashed and awed. When last he had seen Ralph, it was as Bell's protector. Even now the paralytic's pathetic helplessness was more potent than Guy's strength. He was not dead to the girl ; her heart was not empty of gratitude. The old man for whom he had suffered so cruelly was sleeping peacefully in his bed, independent of all circumstance or atonement ; but Bell had not forgotten.

" *He* stands between us," she reiterated. " His

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love, his sacrifice, his defencelessness. I am his affianced wife." She placed her hand over the staring eyes and gently closed them, as though closing the eyes of the dead.

A silence fell upon the room, the ruddy glow flooded the figure in the chair, as though in a benediction of life and warmth. It was Guy who seemed to grow rigid, to age and pale. The dull eyes of Ralph challenged his honour. Ralph had taken what he might not hope to win, yet he held in his nerveless grasp what Guy dared not wrest from him.

Bell stood tremblingly between the two men who claimed her. The dead lover had her troth, the living man her love.

"Tell me," said Guy quietly, after gazing at the spectre of his hopes, "was your life promised to this man, did you belong to him that evening I met you on the cliff two years ago?"

Bell lifted her head; her face flushed with the pride of that past hour.

"That day I was free," she said simply.

"Ah!" he exclaimed with a flash of pleasure.

She had been free and she had bid him come! His was the earlier right—whatever the obligation that intervened, his was the prior claim. He turned to her with a quick movement of passion.

"Sit here," said Bell, evading his outstretched arms, "and I will tell you all."

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With Ralph between them, she told her lover all there was to tell, beginning at the beginning. Her voice faltered sometimes, and sometimes she stopped, but she took up her thread again, forcing herself in the end to speak of her father's dishonour.

"So you see," she concluded piteously, bending her head over the hands Guy held firmly clasped, "even if Ralph did not stand betw en us, we still should be apart."

The hands that held hers tightened their grip, and, in her craving heart, she felt consolation from the contact. Would he love her now as he had loved her before? She had satisfied his desire for confidence, at the sacrifice of the secret of her father's shame. The confession had been torture, but he should not go away again without full understanding. If one misery could heal another, he would be healed.

"You have had your wish," said Bell at last; "I have shifted the burden to your shoulders. You wouldn't be content without. Perhaps all the time you have been deceiving yourself, and knowledge, instead of being liberty, will prove a fetter."

She had made her duty clear. She invested the silent figure in the chair with power and passion. His love, his devotion, his death in life became reality—a reality which forced itself upon the lis-

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tener and impressed its claims. Ralph, silent and unheeding, was a living force ; he lost all insignificance. Guy, grateful for the trust, and trembling with sympathy, said hoarsely :

" It is difficult to strip one's self of one's personality, but if I could speak for that poor fellow, I believe that he would not hold you to your bond."

" Nevertheless," answered Bell, " my life is in his hands ; his word alone shall set me free. There shall be no more betrayals ; the doing and undoing of life is terrible in its sequence. I have made a compact, entered into a bond, and not even God can set me free from the obligation—only Ralph."

CHAPTER XXIV

GOLD IN THE CLAY

THE next afternoon Dr. Strong walked towards the cottage, with head bent, as if in weariness or abstraction. Quick, approaching footsteps made him lift his head. He did it with a jerk, as though to defy suspicion of melancholy. The eyes that met his were purple as the wintry sky, honest eyes that questioned and solicited. The Doctor saluted the friendly-looking stranger and passed on. Guy lifted his cap with a gratified and deferential gesture—it was much to come into even passing contact with one so near to Bell.

The flush of health and pleasure that had mounted to Guy's cheeks, stirred the Doctor's pulse, almost as the blush of a lass stirs the heart of a lad. He lifted his head, halted, and looked back.

"A fine, strapping fellow," was his professional summing up. "A bonny boy!" added his fatherhood.

He looked after the retreating figure yearningly, and, for Walter's sake, with a little jealousy of the

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swinging gait ; but admiration surmounted partiality, and the lines that were growing deep in the rugged face smoothed out in gladness.

While he watched the striding figure ascend between crimson-berried holly hedges and dark rock, Bell came from a by-path and met her lover where the wintry sunshine flooded the road. The Doctor saw the cap, that had been doffed to himself, again uncover the young man's head, and two outstretched hands meet and clasp.

As though some one had slapped his face, he suddenly put up his hand and covered it. He stood so for a moment, then wheeled round and trudged towards the glen, his mouth set in dogged curves, his face drawn, the lines from nose to chin showing cruelly.

Presently he began to whistle, and buttoned his shabby overcoat up to the chin. A short cough broke the whistle, but he reiterated, very much out of tune, that it was "better to live with the devil you know, than die with the devil you don't know ;" trying stoutly to fortify himself with the assurance that whatever is, is best.

Before descending into the valley to the cottage he stopped, and leaned over a rough post-and-rail gate, staring at the reflection of the setting sun with unseeing eyes. What he saw was the two young figures rush together in a manner that meant mutual absorption.

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"Good," he murmured; "I'm glad of it, even if it is as I suspect, that she pledged herself to that poor paralytic for some reason unknown. It makes comparatively little difference to my gladness that she has broken her pledge—her instincts are clean. Bell's husband must come from a law-abiding, healthy stock."

But there was no pleasure at that moment in the man's face. He suffered exceedingly. For years he had disciplined and governed himself to sexual aloofness, and all in a minute the barriers of coldness were swept away by the chance meeting of the lovers. His disease had been making inroads lately, and the physician watched the secret strides of his enemy with savage anger. No one suspected that he suffered—except Walter, who rightly interpreted his foster-father's irritability at the follies of his neighbours—for night and day he was indefatigable and full of projects for the weal of other sufferers. His prognostications in regard to Arthur Searell had proved correct; with loss of memory his physical condition had strengthened. The Doctor was fighting now for the restoration of Ralph, unconscious of what that recovery might mean; though, even had he known, he would have fought for it just the same. But in this hour the dam of self-control broke down, and the repressed stream of human feeling swept all before it—reason, debate, endurance were borne along with the

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current, like uprooted trees. The hungry heart of the man awoke to full consciousness, and the square shoulders, that bore many burdens for others, heaved suddenly with deep sobs. For the first time he wept for himself, his massive head hanging in shame at his own quick falling tears. Yea, while rent with the moment's overmastering yearning for that crowning gift of love's prerogatives, and while the heart-hunger of a lifetime clamoured to be fed, he was clear-sighted and untempted. He called on neither God nor man ; by virtue of knowledge and truth to his principles, he bowed to the inevitable.

On that grey winter's afternoon he was depressed both mentally and physically ; but to his simple mind, his own suffering seemed like exaggeration, and he was keenly aware under it all of a coming severe reckoning with himself.

It was natural that the young should step their separate ways. Walter, also, would find a path diverging from his own ; he was too generous and fair to wish it otherwise. He drew himself up and shook himself like a shaggy dog emerging from a plunge into cold water. Duty would always abide.

" '*And having done all—to stand,*' " he quoted, half audibly, as he descended into the glen with uplifted head.

With the twilight Bell came in. The Doctor sat

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with his back to the light. He greeted her with noisy salutations. He hoped for her confidence, but he would not put out any feelers for it; external circumstances had put him astray, and it was a touch of inspiration on Bell's part to bring him, in his hour of isolation, into his closest communion with humanity.

"Here I am!" he said, avoiding her eyes, "awaiting your pleasure."

She made no answer, but drawing a low stool to the hearth, took off her hat. Then she seated herself at his feet, and leaned her arm across his knees as she had been wont to when a child. Under the pleasure her action and close contact gave him, he found himself at his old trick. He mentally measured the round arm from the wrist, and chuckled at its proportions; but under the instinct so deeply rooted in him, he was keenly conscious that the soft, fair thing nestling up to him so confidingly was pondering the things that puzzled him. The uplifted calm strength of her face did not escape him. He stroked her hair gently; how bright it was where it caught the flashes of firelight! She was a living work of art, beautifully proportioned and coloured; but she was something else, too. Her beauty might attract, but it was not that which held men to her; nor was it altogether animal vigour which, in spite of repression, had made her girlhood so intense

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and radiant. She had a subtle something else, difficult to classify, that converted coldness in others into warmth, and urged them to acts they had no thought of.

"How strong you are!" she said gently, breaking in upon his reverie. "You always create an atmosphere of strength; it does one good to come into contact with you."

He snorted contemptuously. The half hour over the post-and-rail gate was unpleasantly vivid in his memory.

"You remind me of a big St. Bernard," she went on, unheeding the sniffs and snorts, "with small dogs barking at your heels; you throw a disdainful glance right and left, and go your own way calmly."

"Tut! rubbish; don't be sentimental," he said awkwardly, trying by severity to turn the conversation into channels less embarrassing.

"I won't," said Bell, drawing his shaggy head down and kissing him. "I thank God for you, dear! That is pure common sense!"

He was shading his eyes with his hand, awfully ashamed of their red lids. He dared not look at her, lest she should find him out.

"When things are most difficult the thought of you helps," she added quietly.

After all, there was a balance—how had he been shaken? the Doctor thought. The girl was re-

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minding^g him that his life had not been without its uses.

"You find things difficult?" he queried, an added gentleness in the touch of the hand that passed over her hair.

Then she told him her story, and Guy's and Ralph's. The man listened in silence. There was something here that could not be explained scientifically. He was an honest man, and owned that his judgment of Ralph had been warped.

When Bell's voice ceased they sat in profound silence. Many thoughts chased each other in the man's mind, bringing him to the conclusion that, though heroism and love might create only a momentary halo, yet in its light the soul was revealed to self and others.

"But where is Guy?" he asked at last.

"Gone back to his work among the mountains," she replied. "He says he grows cowardly beneath a roof; exposed to the four winds of heaven, he is put upon his mettle."

"A comfortable sort of man to choose for a husband, I must say!" grumbled the Doctor, well pleased with these children at heart. "He'll contract rheumatism; he's a young fool. But there, he's not the only fool. Did he leave any address?"

Bell had flushed rosy red at the word "husband." She had never dared even to think what the Doctor actually put into words.

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"Yes, he left his address."

"Well, you might want it!" The Doctor relapsed into silence again; then he said abruptly:

"Ralph will recover consciousness!"

He watched Bell to see the effect of his words. Her gladness was all for Ralph. She sprang to her feet with a cry of joy. The Doctor, released from her detaining hands, walked thoughtfully up and down the apartment. "Now understand me," he said presently, coming to a full stop in front of her and looking into her excited face: "No poaching on my preserves. Keep your own side of the fence; you are Ralph's nurse, young lady. No sentiment; no nerves; if you excite my patient, upon your own head be the consequences! All private and personal feeling must go hang; the patient is sacred."

"I understand."

"Good girl. Now give me some tea."

While they sat in the firelight drinking it, the outer door opened, and Arthur Searell came in. He put down his pick with unnecessary noise. His jealousy was roused.

"No light in the window for me!" he quavered plaintively; "I am left to stumble along in the dark."

A spasm of his old contempt and wrath flashed across the Doctor's face. The story he had just listened to was still tingling in his ears.

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"Serve you right!" he broke in. "You've lighted so many lamps for other folk, haven't you?"

The old man looked genuinely surprised and injured. He tried to straighten his bent back, and addressed his unappreciative company :

"I'm making all your fortunes!" he affirmed loftily.

"Perhaps!" responded the Doctor drily; "but that isn't your fault; 'The best-laid plots of mice and men,' etc. If you are a benefactor, you're not to blame!"

Walter opened the door of an inner apartment, and glanced round the room.

"I heard you," he said, his eyes resting upon the Doctor. His face wore the strained, intense look of one who has watched long and expectantly. He smiled across at Bell, gave a troubled glance at the grumbling old man, and waited with his hand on the door for the Doctor to pass through; then he closed the door behind them.

"Eh?" queried the Doctor, eagerly questioning the expressive face. Many words were never necessary between them.

"I fancy there is a change," said Walter.

The Doctor bustled past into the room where Walter had kept his long and patient vigil. He bent over the bed on which Ralph lay, kept there by his orders. After a long look into the wide-

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opened eyes, the Doctor straightened himself and nodded.

"Consciousness is returning."

Walter's lips quivered ; he gave no other sign of what he felt. The Doctor opened his lips, as though to add something, then checked himself. He busied himself instead with the shaded lamp and the fire. It was Bell's room, the room where she had pinned her little note to the pillow long ago. Perhaps both men were thinking of it, and the issues of that misleading scrawl. Walter's eyes fell upon the Doctor.

"You want a rest," he affirmed abruptly ; "you haven't had a thorough holiday since I was a boy—you remember?"

The Doctor nodded. He knew the time Walter referred to.

"I wish I could relieve you—one day I may. I have been blowing soap bubbles, while you have slaved night and day to relieve pain."

The Doctor looked up ; he wondered what was the lad coming to.

"You are repairing life's destructions," Walter went on, with some bitterness in his eager tones ; "and if I cannot build spiritually, I may hope to combat physical ill. It will be a relief to conquer something ; and my hope in labour will be that ultimately you may take some pride in it. I owe you everything."

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"My boy!" exclaimed the Doctor, with a grip of Walter's shoulder.

"When I come back to you with M.D. affixed to the unworthy name of Searell, what shall you say?"

"Boy?" queried the Doctor hoarsely.

"I mean," explained Walter, with some embarrassment, "I am in a fog. I may work out later, but it seems that no truth is absolute—only relative. The sight of my father humiliates and wounds me." He blundered on, flushing hotly at the confession. "He has caused us all suffering, but his nothingness seems to me ten thousand times more terrible than would be the bitterest regrets. The science which could save from such a living death is worthy the devotion of generations of men. I am awkward in my expression, I fear."

He turned to the bed, his eyes kindling with compassion when they rested upon Ralph. "But I see your standpoint—that the salvation of a man is deliverance from that which makes his sin easy. I have resolved, therefore, to educate myself for the inquiry of how far human frailty may be traceable to disease of the body as well as of the soul, lest I fall into the error of demanding too much. It has appeared of late to me that indulgence in too much religious ecstasy dulls penetration, and that contemplation, to be of any profit, must be coupled with action. I shall never be of your be-

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lief, that sensuality yields to the physician alone ; but it has struck me very forcibly during the past weeks how often the Master healed before He preached, and how closely associated the Doctor of Divinity and the Doctor of Medicine are."

The Doctor heard him out quietly, understanding how much it had cost the lad to make the concession ; then, resting his hand upon Walter's shoulder again, he said : " There will always be some ill-content to leave things to chance, unhappy in the present, through brooding on what might be ; but don't be impatient at repeated failure ; the law of life is much labour for a small result. The honour lies in the labour, boy. One day of honest work does more good for the world than a whole lifetime of dreams."

CHAPTER XXV

OUT OF THE FURNACE

It was midnight, and Bell's room looked its cosiest. A log smouldered upon the hearth, its resinous aromatic fragrance permeating the apartment with a faint perfume of pine woods.

Seated near, at a small table, his beard and hair falling upon a rough white flannel wrapper, Arthur Searell looked like an ancient Druid. He was turning over the leaves of a large, darkly-bound Bible, occasionally reading out passages aloud, then pausing to note whether his occupation attracted the attention of his son, towards whom his eyes first appealed in baffled weakness, then shot glances of vindictive passion ; for he coupled any discomfort, or personal defeat, with the presence of the son who was his mainstay. To-night he had been of no interest to anybody, and he was aggrieved. He had been left to doze in his chair and waken again unheeded ; he had alternately slept and grumbled hour after hour, and watched senselessly and open-eyed the ebbing of the life that had been given in his stead.

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Walter was leaning with folded arms over the rail at the head of the bed, watching with strained attention the face on the pillow, or removing his gaze from the wan face framed with the black hair for an interrogative glance at the Doctor, who for several hours had been lost to the outside world. Past and future were not to him ; only *now*. Hands, feet, eyes obeyed the man's concentrated thought, moving automatically in service. Bell, in her soft grey gown, with face almost as white as the linen at her throat, interpreted the Doctor's wishes, handing him this or that, as need arose, for the Doctor was master of the situation. His iron-grey hair was pushed off his forehead, leaving the full frontal to sight, his eyes glowed with enthusiasm, his cheeks were flushed ; in this hour of triumph he was young, full of the vigour born of confidence and success. It was worth a lifetime of labour to feel that he had been successful in restoring the dying man to consciousness and communion.

The casement was wide open, and on the sweet, fresh night air came the song of the river, subdued and saddened by distance. The room under Bell's hands had been prepared as a guest-chamber ; red berries gleamed among bunches of dark glossy leaves. All ugly appurtenances to a sick-room had been removed. Ralph must open his eyes to pleasant sights, and while she looked to see that

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the berries were rightly placed, he dwelt on her face with recognition. The Doctor drew back with a sigh of satisfaction. Walter grasped his hand with that quick, proud appreciation that had rewarded the elder man for more than one long, strong pull.

Bell's gladness leapt to her face.

"Oh, my dear!" she exclaimed, when she had thrilled at the light in the dark eyes that sought her own. Then, mindful of instruction, she knelt by the bedside quietly, although she quivered with gladness, gratitude, and contrition.

That was Ralph's supreme hour. It was his last, but in the silence there throbbed to him the tenderest solicitude that ever had been his. His breath came in long-drawn sighs—there was in his eyes that expression with which an infant looks out on a new world—shadowed as though by recollections of a previous existence. Passion and pain had left no trace; the soul had been borne on passing waves of emotion to a shore of peace.

After a long silence Ralph's cramped hand moved slightly towards Bell. She clasped it in both her own, as though she would hold him back from any force that drew him. A pang of coming loss assailed her; the world without Ralph *might* hold enduring love; with Ralph, love was sure. No question of fitness or unfitness intruded here;

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a sadder problem than physical separation was to be solved—the parting of soul from soul.

“Oh, my dear!” cried Bell again. She could not bear it. She bowed her head over the hand she held, and her stifled sob seemed to grip the throat of the two men who stood behind her.

“Don’t you fret, dear heart,” said the voice that had been dumb to her for weeks. “It’s all over now; it’s clean done an’ gone. I see as I’m home—an’ with friends.”

Bell made no answer, fighting for self-control; so Walter cleared his throat and said, as well as he could: “Yes, old fellow—at home.”

The dark eyes closed, a smile of satisfaction spread over his weary face.

“That’s good hearin’ . . . an’ feelin’, too. A feller can’t wish for better.”

The Doctor raised Ralph’s head gently, and put a small phial to his lips. Ralph swallowed a few drops of the contents, then presently unclosed his eyes. They rested on the bent, grey-headed figure under the yellow lamplight. The repose and well-being of it seemed to strike Ralph.

“Is that the old man?” he asked.

Arthur Searell’s eyes had been roving from one face to another. They were held now by the dark eyes as by a spell. When Ralph’s heavy lids closed, the old man drew his breath with relief. A spasm of fear, as though in partial recollection,

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contracted his features. He passed his hand over his forehead, looked dazed, then brightened with a remembrance.

"I've called the new claim after you. We'll go halves!"

He came to the bedside, but getting no response, said again, in a tone of protest:

"We'll go halves; shake hands on it."

"He's shared too much with you already," said Walter, lifting his head. "Go back to your seat."

The old man went slowly, rebuffed. Presently all were startled by a fit of convulsive sobbing. The grey head was bent.

"Let him have it all," he gasped; "I won't divide it. I've dug it deep! He can have it all. He's been good to me, I know that. I don't want to rob him; I only want to shake hands."

Bell went over to her father.

"He was always a good lad to me. I only want to shake hands," he reiterated.

Bell dried his eyes. His suffering hurt her; there was a part of her that always flew to him. She smoothed the white hair and soothed him.

"Come," she said, leading him across the room.

"Ralph," she said, bending over him, "he asks your pardon."

"He's very welcome," responded Ralph simply; and Bell placed the long thin fingers of the old man into those of the dying boy.

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Arthur Searell went back to his chair, well satisfied. "He shook hands; he did shake hands!" he repeated, mumbling to himself and seeming to gain added satisfaction with each repetition.

Ralph fell asleep and slept easily for a few moments, while the storm of repressed sorrow rose higher in Bell's heart. Must she, she thought, let him go without any understanding? did he think her faithful unto death? or had he forgotten her vow?

He woke with a start and a quick look round of alarm, as though seeking in his prison cell for the barred window and the stars. His wandering glance travelled to the Doctor's face.

His own brightened.

"Home," he murmured; "that's what I've struck—an' a man can't ask no more. I'm recollectin' now, Bell," he continued; "an' don't you take on, for it's better as it is."

"That's what you always say when the loss is yours!" she answered bitterly.

"Loss! you call it!" he replied, his eyes lighting with full knowledge, and his voice strong. He patted her hand with his. "Then you call it wrong. What 'ad I when we met at Miners' Alley? I'd a bitter heart an' no sweet thoughts to soften it; every man's hand seemed lifted agen me, an' mine was lifted agen every man. Then the love o' you crept in, an' for the first time I

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smelt the scent o' the grass, an' heard the song o' the birds."

"But," asked Bell, with a cry of pain, "suppose that I had failed you?"

"You couldn't 'ave," said Ralph, with a long-drawn breath; "while you were Bell you couldn't 'ave. I thought out all that many's the time while I were in gaol. There's them as say the blackest cloud 'as got a silver linin'. An' my silver linin' were to see, clear an' bright, as how I hadn't got no right to you."

The Doctor drew a deep breath, and held the phial again to the pale lips. Walter leaned his head on his arm over the head of the bed. For a moment there was absolute silence, save for the occasional rustle of the leaves the old man turned. Then Ralph went on:

"From the first, I never meant to hold you. It made it easier for you, dear, to let me save your name from disgrace; that's why I let you think you were my girl. That day in the Court I seed, as plain as a pike, how the name o' Morton weren't of no account, never could be"—a sob caught his breath—"an' as the gentleman raked up what was gone against the dead, there come into my mind a sort o' thought like this 'ere—that p'r'aps Him above might count somethin' less against the father if the son did more than his share."

Walter's shoulders heaved; two bright drops

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splashed down upon Ralph's forehead. The Doctor turned his back to the bed.

"My old Dad weren't what you'd call good," continued Ralph, uttering his first disapprobation; "not exactly what you'd call good, so there it stands! I ain't religious; I don't know the rights o' these things; but when I used to lie awake at night—the walls were narrer, an' sometimes I couldn't sleep—an' I looked up at the stars, I got a sort o' notion it might be managed."

"It will be managed, my boy," said the Doctor, wheeling round suddenly, "rest assured. It's wonderful how much more comes to pass than we expect."

This hearty assurance brought a contented expression to the fading face. He lay so still that the Doctor bent down anxiously. But Ralph was conscious of Bell's tears upon his hand.

"I won't say," he said to her gently, "as how I wasn't tempted to hold you at the first. I were. But I used to say . . . the words to myself . . . after the first . . . in which I give you . . . back. . . . They sounded well . . . but I can't recall 'em!"

"Your love has been one long gift!" she said, and kissed his parched lips. He opened his eyes wide and smiled.

"You're very . . . welcome," he replied.

He breathed like a child in a deep sleep; then,

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presently, he said : " We shan't never climb the hills together no more. . . . I smell the heather in the hollow by the hut. . . . I hear the flax a clappin' of its hands . . . an' the rain beatin', beatin' on the leaves. . . . The old man has struck a patch. . . . Don't stand there at the window, Bell—I'm goin' in. It's the last watch—the rain don't hurt me, dear. . . . 'An' whistlin' down the hollow goes the boy that minds the mill.' . . . If a man loves a girl, 'e's gone past bein' satisfied with 'er for 'is friend, even 'is best friend. . . . Every man has 'is turn, an' this is mine."

He lay still for a moment, breathing heavily ; then, rising on his elbow, he called out in a loud voice, " The mist's a-liftin' off the crags—an' I see—Dad !"

In the hush that followed the glad cry the old man's voice broke. He had drawn the little table near, and, with one hand spread out upon it, apparently oblivious of all but his discovery, he read eagerly :

" '*And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain.*' A great and high mountain !" he reiterated in trembling eagerness ; he mumbled to himself, following with the claw like finger the printed page : " '*And her light was like the light of a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone clear as crystal.*' " He hugged the volume closer, his eyes

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and grey old face lighting up. " '*And he that walked with me had a golden rod to measure the city ;*' a golden rod ! a golden rod !" His white hair touched the page, he bent so low, shaking more and more as he went on, his voice rising with every verse.

" '*And the building of the wall was of jasper ; and the city was pure gold like unto clear glass. And the foundations of the city were garnished with all manner of precious stones. The first foundation was jasper ; the second, sapphire ; the third a chalcedony ; the fourth an emerald.*' "

His covetous fingers opened and shut, and his voice dropped to an inaudible whisper ; the sound of Bell's weeping penetrated to his ears. He lost his place, went on again : " '*And the twelve gates were twelve pearls ; every several gate was of one pearl ; and the street of the city was pure gold——*' "

He faltered, the avarice died from his face, and he turned to Bell with a troubled look. He glanced from her to Walter and the Doctor, then back at the bright bowed head. Stretching out his shaking hand, he let it rest upon the ruddy locks caressingly.

" Pure gold," he murmured, " pure gold."











